Donna Parker
Special Agent

by Marcia Martin

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By
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"Oh, Daddy," Donna giggled in spite of herself. "You know girls don't play football." She reluctantly picked up her fork and speared a piece of scrambled egg.

Mr. Parker arose from the table. "Want a lift to school, Jimmy, old man?" he asked. "I guess third-graders can't be late either."

" 'By, Mom," said Jimmy, taking a side-swipe at his face with his napkin, putting two bottle tops and a pack of baseball cards in his jacket pocket, and waving to his mother as he raced after Mr. Parker.

Before Mrs. Parker had a chance to answer her son, there was a loud bang as the front door slammed.

Donna jumped. "Can't that child *ever* learn to close the door quietly?" she complained.

Mrs. Parker got up from the table and smiled at her daughter. "Now, dear, your manners weren't exactly perfect when you were eight years old. He'll calm down."

"I know, but—"

"Anybody there?" called a voice from outside. A shock of bright red hair was seen at the kitchen screen door.

"Hi, Ricky," answered Donna. "Come on in. I'll be ready in a second." Hurriedly she finished the rest of her egg, and washed it down with a glass of milk.

A red-haired, freckle-faced girl of Donna's age stepped into the kitchen. "Don't tell me you're having trouble with your breakfast again, Donna!" Fredericka West, better known as Ricky, dropped into a chair. "Why, you ate bigger breakfasts than I did, at Camp Cherrydale."

Donna nodded glumly. She could still picture the large screened dining hall at the camp where she and Ricky had been junior counselors during the past summer.

"I guess it was the country air that improved my morning appetite. Anyhow, I'm through now."

Donna pushed her chair back, and smoothed out the wrinkles in her dress as she stood up.

"Another new one, Donna?" Ricky asked admiringly. "Gee, that's a pretty dress, Mrs. Parker. I wish my mother could sew as well as you do."

Mrs. Parker brushed off the compliment, but she was obviously pleased. "With my new sewing machine, the dresses practically sew themselves, Ricky."

After good-bys, and a mad scramble for pencils, the girls left.

"Your mother really is pleased with the machine, isn't she?" said Ricky, as they strolled down Elm Street. The two girls were silent for a moment, remembering the

strange events of the summer that had ended when a French count presented Donna with an electric sewing machine.

"I guess nothing so exciting will ever happen to us again," mused Donna.

"Oh, I don't know," Ricky answered. "We might save somebody from getting run over, or we might find someone's long-lost parents, or we might get a fortune left to us. You never know."

Donna laughed. "Ricky, if that isn't just like you. You go around thinking the craziest things all the time. Those things just don't happen to plain ordinary people like us."

Little did Donna realize that, even as she spoke, events were happening in the town of Summerfield which were to give her an experience as exciting as any of Ricky's daydreams.

They turned a corner, and the tall tower of the junior high school came into sight.

"Right now all I'm thinking about is *that.*" Donna pointed to the building. "I'm awfully glad we only have short periods today. It takes me about a week to get used to sitting at a desk all day."

Ricky nodded. "I'm glad we're having short periods,

too—but for a different reason. I can't wait for the end of the day, so we can register for our clubs."

A far-off, dreamy look appeared in Ricky's eyes. "From the minute I came to junior high, I couldn't wait to become a senior. All those wonderful things—the senior combined chorus, and the senior dancing group, and the senior dramatic group."

"But, Ricky," Donna protested, "you could have joined the junior groups last year, if you were interested. We decided that we'd rather play basketball and volley ball after school."

Ricky wrinkled her freckled nose. "Sure. Who wants to give a play just in front of your own club, with everybody criticizing you, and not even costumes or make-up? But it's different in front of the whole assembly, maybe even at night—" She sighed as she pictured the spectacle in her mind.

"Well," Donna interrupted her friend's dream, "now that the subject has come up, I'm glad you mentioned it. I was getting a little tired of those old ball games, too. And I have a wonderful idea."

Ricky turned to her friend. "Oh, I knew you'd feel the same way about things, Donna. We always do! And now,

what's your 'wonderful idea'?"

Donna hesitated. "Well—" She found it hard to begin. "Well, last week I took a book out of the library. It was about a girl reporter. She started by writing on her school paper, and then she took a course in journalism, and then she got a job on a big city paper. And, Rick—" now that Donna was warming up to her subject, the words rushed out— "it sounded just wonderful. Just the sort of thing you'd like."

She paused, waiting for the red-haired girl to say something. Ricky had stopped and was staring at her.

"Don't you see?" Donna went on. "We could join the newspaper staff, as our club. We could get some real experience that way, and maybe we'd like it enough to make it our career." She ended on a pleading note.

Ricky stopped at a bench which was placed at a bus stop. She pulled Donna over and sat her down on the bench. Then she plopped down beside her.

"Now, listen here, Donna Parker. I have it all planned. We're going to join the dramatics group. Didn't I just finish telling you I've dreamed about it for simply years and years? You with your dark hair, and me with my red hair—why, we'll be simply wonderful together. Can't

you just see us? The lights are dimmed, the curtains open, applause fills the house—"

Donna stood up. "Ricky, there you go again. Can't you be practical just for once? How do you know you'd even get a part in a play? Why, I know girls who were in the dramatics club who never got closer to the stage than putting make-up on someone else."

Her voice trembled. This was the nearest she and Ricky had ever come to quarreling. They always did everything together. People had come to expect it. Certainly it had never occurred to her that Ricky might have definite ideas of her own.

By now, Ricky was standing, too. Both girls were pale as they started toward the school again.

"Donna, you know I'd like us to be in a club together. But I'd simply die in that stuffy old newspaper club. And if you want another reason—" she lowered her voice—"here it comes."

Ricky directed Donna's gaze across the street, to where a girl in a bright red dress was hurrying toward the school.

"What's Joyce Davenport got to do with it?" Donna asked.

"She'll be in it," Ricky answered. "Just because her

father owns the *Summerfield Daily Bulletin,* she'll not only be in the newspaper club, but she'll probably want to run the whole thing. And I cannot stand that girl. She's just plain stuck-up."

Donna was more unhappy than ever. She had had only a few meetings with Joyce and did not know her too well. But she did know that she always got very high marks, and that her cold manner made the other students think she was looking down her nose at them.

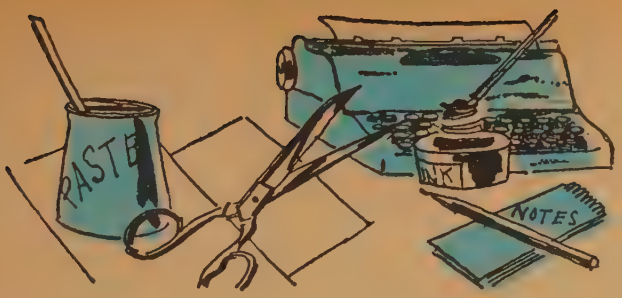
"Gee, Rick. I wish you'd change your mind. I'm just not the type to get up on a stage and spout. Won't you think it over?"

Ricky shook her head solemnly. "I've thought it over enough already. Maybe you'll change *your* mind."

"Let's not talk about it any more," said Donna, linking her arm through Ricky's. "Here come some of the girls."

But as they hastened toward the group of lively, chattering girls, Donna had a sinking sensation in her chest. She knew that neither she nor Ricky would change, and they would each go their separate ways. She wondered how it would feel not to have Ricky by her side.

"I haven't even walked into the school yet," she thought, "and my problems are beginning already."



CHAPTER 2 *Spies in Summerfield*

Donna and Ricky were greeted warmly by their friends.

"Let's all sit together in the auditorium," said Anne Franklin, a tall blond girl with a lively sense of humor. "You can all watch the fun. When Mr. Greer gets up and makes that same old welcoming speech that we have to listen to every September, I'm going to let my little old white mouse out of his cage. That'll liven things up."

There was a gasp from several of the girls. "You—you mean you brought your mouse to—to school?" someone asked in a faltering voice.

Anne giggled. "Not really. But I was tempted. Can't you just see the faces, and hear the screams?"

There was a relieved sigh. "Don't scare us like that, Anne. One of these days you'll get yourself into a peck of trouble."

Donna started up the stone steps of the school. "If we don't hurry, we won't get those famous little white papers that they give out, and then we won't know which room to go to."

At the beginning of the assembly which was attended by all students of the school, sheets of paper were given out dividing each class alphabetically, and telling where each section was to report. Donna glanced hastily at her sheet.

"I guess I'm in the K to P group," she noticed. "My home room is three-oh-four."

"And Ricky West is in the Q to Z group," said another girl. "She reports to three-ten. Say, Donna, how will it feel not to be in the same class with Ricky?"

Donna glanced at Ricky several times during the assembly. Now they wouldn't have classes together, either, since each home-room class had a different roster. She wondered whether Ricky was as upset as she was, about their being apart.

But although it felt strange, as she went from one room to another, not to compare notes with Ricky on teachers and classes, Donna found that the time passed quickly. Before she knew it, the morning was almost over and

she was back in her home room.

The teacher handed out sheets of paper on which appeared a list of all clubs which were open to seniors.

"You may have five minutes to look at the list, and five minutes to get to the room where you sign up for the club," Mr. Warren announced.

Some boys and girls, clearly knowing where they were heading, dashed out of the room immediately.

Donna sat at her desk and looked at the list. Ricky would be on her way to the dramatics club now, she knew. Once Ricky made up her mind, there was no stopping her. And it had felt so strange, not being able to turn to her all day. Should she be the one to give in, and go to dramatics instead of the newspaper club?

Suddenly she stood up. "I won't!" she thought. "I'm a big girl now, and it's about time I learned to stand on my own two feet. I know I wouldn't enjoy being in plays, and there's no reason why I should do it just because Ricky does."

Clutching her list, she quickly left the room and raced up the stairs. She rarely went up to the fourth floor, since there were no regular classrooms there, and she had a hard time finding the little room which served as a news-

paper office. She approached the door hesitantly.

To her surprise, the room was crowded with people. "I'm lucky I didn't wait any longer," she thought. "The club might have been filled."

"Hi, Donna," called several of the girls and boys. "You here, too?"

"We're just ready to leave," said Jack Kingston, who was in Donna's class. "Sign your name, and we can all walk home together."

Donna felt better, knowing that many of her classmates would be on the staff. She was glad they had offered to walk home with her, since she did not know where to find Ricky.

A few of the group dropped out on the homeward walk, but most of them were still there when they reached Donna's house.

"Ow, I'm beat!" said one of the boys, dropping on the front step of the Parker house.

"How about coming up on the porch and resting?" suggested Donna. "Maybe Mother has some lemonade in the refrigerator."

"Sounds good to me," said Karen, a small girl with blond curly hair and large blue eyes.

"Don't ask twice," agreed one of the boys, and they raced to the porch and collapsed on assorted chairs and gliders.

Donna went to see about the lemonade. When she came back, tray in hand, she heard Joyce Davenport's name mentioned.

"What's this about Joyce?" she asked, remembering what Ricky had said about her that morning.

There was a moment's silence.

"She signed up for the newspaper club today," Karen explained. "Of course everyone expected that. After all, with all that experience she got this summer, working on her father's paper, she probably feels the school paper would collapse without her."

"I guess you got there too late to hear what she was saying, Donna," added Jack Kingston. "Everything was—" and he mimicked Joyce's voice—" 'when I'm editor we must do this,' and 'when I'm editor we must do that.' "

"Yeah," agreed several of the boys. "Who does she think she is?"

"Well, I for one don't think we ought to vote for her as editor," said Mary Jefferson, who had been quiet until now. "She'll just make us miserable, giving orders right

and left. I don't go for tyrants!"

Again there was a silence, while everyone considered the idea.

"Hey, Donna." It was Jack again. "How about your being editor? You always get good marks in English. And you wouldn't boss us around."

"That's a swell idea!" commented several of the girls and boys. The rest nodded.

Donna was struck dumb. Herself as editor of the *Summerfield Sum-It-Up?* She just couldn't see it.

Everyone waited for her answer.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly. Why, I don't know a thing about running a newspaper. I like writing stories, and all that, but I wouldn't know the first thing about putting out a paper."

"You could learn," said Mary, leaning forward in her chair. "There's a new teacher in charge of the paper—I forget her name—but I'm sure she could show you what to do."

"That's right," agreed Karen. "I think her name is Miss Fischer. I only saw her for a minute. She's young, and she seems awfully nice. If she helps, you could do it, Donna. We all know you could."

"Come on, Donna." Steve Collins and Bill Blanchard joined Karen in coaxing. "You get the best marks of anyone, next to Joyce."

Bill got down on his knees and clasped his hands. "Please, your highness, save us from the fate of having Joyce Davenport as editor!"

Donna giggled. Bill looked so funny on the porch floor. Then she became serious again.

"No, honestly," she protested. "I know you aren't very fond of Joyce—"

There were several loud moans.

"But anyhow," she continued, "she still knows a lot more than I do. And the important thing is that we have a good newspaper."

"Such school spirit!" muttered Steve.

Karen turned to him. "But Donna's really right. The most important thing is the paper. And if she thinks Joyce can do a better job, then we'll just have to suffer."

Donna breathed a sigh of relief. She was afraid she hadn't quite convinced anyone.

"And I'm sure that Miss Fischer won't let her be too terribly awful," added Donna.

"We'll have to talk to the rest of the staff now, and

point out that what Donna said is right." This came from Tommy Sheridan, who was sitting in a far corner of the porch. He had not said a word during the discussion.

Suddenly Jack turned and pointed to Tommy. "Now that's what I mean!" he said.

"What'd I do now?" asked Tommy, in a bewildered tone.

"Not a thing. That's just it. There goes Joyce, bragging all over the place about how terrific she is. And you never say a word. But everyone knows that you have twenty times as much you could brag about, if you wanted to."

Donna looked from one to another, searching for an explanation. Apparently everyone else knew what Jack was talking about, and she hated to appear stupid.

But Karen noticed her expression. "You were away at camp all summer, Donna, so I guess you missed the big news about Tommy. Tell her, Tommy."

The boy blushed, and fidgeted in his chair. He was always very shy.

"I'll tell her," offered Jack. "You're just too modest, Tommy."

There was a clinking of glasses, and everyone settled back to enjoy the story.

"You know that Tommy's father owns a helicopter factory."

Donna nodded. Sheridan Helicopters were well-known throughout the country. She was always reading about people who were being rescued by them, since the tiny, queer-looking planes could land in very small spaces. They made a great many planes for the Army and the Navy, too.

Jack went on. "And you know how interested Tommy is in motors, and all the new work that they do at the factory."

Donna nodded again. Improvements on the helicopters were being made constantly.

"But did you know about the science contest that the Consolidated Electric Company runs every year? Anyone from twelve to twenty years of age can enter it. They pick the people who send in the most interesting improvements on any present-day inventions."

"For instance," Tommy interrupted, "you could design a new kind of electric light, or a better mouse-trap, or anything. It doesn't even have to work electrically."

Donna could see, by the way Tommy spoke, how interested he was in the subject.

"Well," Jack continued, "Tommy sent in a design for

a new kind of helicopter. I don't know much about it, but it was something about the way the propeller revolves that makes it much better."

Donna waited for Tommy to tell her more about this design, but he said nothing.

"And he won second prize—one hundred dollars!" Steve said, anxious to tell the rest of the story.

"And his father thought it was such a good design that he used Tommy's idea," added Bill Blanchard.

"And Tommy got his picture in all the papers," said Mary, getting so excited that her glass of lemonade almost tipped over.

"Well," said Tommy, "I didn't like that part too much. But Consolidated said that they would like to keep in touch with me."

"They think he shows a lot of promise," Karen went on, "and they want to see anything else he designs."

"I'm working on something right now," confided Tommy. "I think it might turn out to be pretty good, but of course you can never tell."

"You'll probably start your own helicopter company one of these days," laughed Jack. "You'll be in competition with your father."

"Oh, my father isn't worried about competition. He can still hold his own. Only one thing worries him—" Tommy's voice trailed off.

"What's that?" prompted Steve.

Tommy looked uncomfortable. "Spies."

There was a gasp.

"You're kidding," said Mary.

"I wish I were," replied Tommy. "No, it's the truth. My father has to be awfully careful about the people he hires. Suppose an enemy country got hold of his plans?"

"But if he's careful, why does he worry?" asked Donna.

"You can't be too careful," answered Tommy. "It might not even be someone who works in the factory. Just one person who gets hold of some secret information can cause all sorts of trouble."

The gaiety of the crowd disappeared. Tommy's words had made them all thoughtful. Quietly they said good-by and drifted homeward. Donna was left alone on the porch.

"Spies?" she thought. "Here in Summerfield?" The thought made cold shivers run up and down her spine.

CHAPTER 3 *Milk Toast and a Strange Man*

Donna awoke with a heavy feeling. Something was wrong.

The clock by her bedside said a quarter to eight, and she knew she would have to hurry. Instead, she lay there and stared at the ceiling. She tried to remember why she felt like this.

Ricky? It seemed she hardly saw her any more. The two girls had different classes, and Ricky was as much caught up with the activities in the dramatics club as she was with the newspaper. Several times they had walked to school together, but it just wasn't as much fun as it used to be. But that wasn't what was bothering her just now, she knew.

The newspaper? In the week since school had started, she had learned a lot about working for a newspaper.

"Copy" and "leads" and "dummies" were everyday words now. And almost everyone had promised to vote for Joyce, which she thought was only right. So it wasn't that, either.

School? They had just been doing review work, and she certainly hadn't had any trouble there. And her subjects today—

Donna pulled the covers over her head and shuddered. That was it! This morning was her first cooking class.

She thought back to all the stories she had heard about Miss Merwood, the cooking teacher, and the horrible things that happened in her class. It was common knowledge that at least one girl cried during every cooking period.

Donna wondered what Miss Merwood could possibly do to make a ninth-grade girl cry. Well, she didn't particularly want to find out.

If only she had a sore throat, or a tummy-ache. But no—she felt extremely healthy.

"Oh, well," she sighed, kicking off the covers and sitting on the edge of her bed, "I might as well get it over with."

Donna felt the strange look that her mother gave her when she came down to breakfast.

"What's the trouble, dear?" Mrs. Parker asked with concern in her voice. "You don't look quite right this morning."

"Oh, nothing, Mommy." Donna attempted a smile. "Just Miss Merwood, first class this morning."

"The cooking teacher?" Mrs. Parker tried to comfort her daughter. "I've heard the stories, dear. Study hard, follow directions, and mind your manners, and I'm sure you'll have no trouble."

Mr. Parker looked up from his grapefruit. "Why, Donna's a good cook. Makes terrific pancakes for me on Sunday mornings. She shouldn't have to worry a bit about cooking."

"But we have to make all sorts of queer things, Daddy," explained Donna. "Cocoa with salt in it, and Floating Island, and cream of tomato soup with white sauce."

"Ugh!" said Jimmy. "I'll take Mom's cooking any day. Don't try any of that stuff out on *me,* Sis."

"I'm sure it won't be nearly as bad as you expect, dear," said Mrs. Parker.

But when Donna entered the large cooking room, she felt as though there were butterflies in her stomach.

Miss Merwood stood at the door. Her gray hair was

slightly tumbled, and she looked flushed.

"Hurry, girls, hurry. Lots to do. No time to waste. Take a seat quickly, any seat. No scraping of stools. Quickly and quietly, quickly and quietly."

The girls looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes, as though to say, "I told you so."

Donna glanced around her. There were about six large tables, each with four kitchen stools. A sink stood on one side of each table, a stove on the other. Cabinets lined two walls, a blackboard filled another, and windows on the fourth wall faced the street. In a corner stood two large refrigerators.

Everyone tiptoed over and sat down on a stool. Donna found herself sitting next to Karen.

"Three minutes, girls," Miss Merwood announced. "Too long to get your places. Shouldn't take over one and a half minutes to get settled. Do better next time."

Karen looked at Donna and made a face.

Miss Merwood spent several minutes discussing words used in cooking. Donna was amazed at how little she seemed to know. What was the difference between baking and roasting? Or mincing onions and dicing them? And Miss Merwood's brisk manner was enough to put any

knowledge she did have right out of her head.

"Oh, well," she thought, "when we get to the actual cooking, I'm sure it will be better."

"Waste not, want not," Miss Merwood was saying. "Must get all milk out of the bottle, scrape sides of pots, use left-overs. And never, never—" her tone sounded shocked— *"never* leave food on your plate. Dreadful!"

Donna knew that whatever the girls cooked, they served and ate immediately afterward. "Well, I guess cocoa with salt couldn't taste too terrible," she decided. But she was unprepared for Miss Merwood's next statement.

"Nice easy dish. Simple. Just the thing for first lesson." She wrote on the board in large letters MILK TOAST.

The classroom had been quiet, but now Donna could almost feel the stillness. She had once seen a friend of her grandmother's eat milk toast, and wondered how anyone could possibly swallow a piece of plain toast with boiling milk poured over it.

And Miss Merwood had said that they had to eat every bit of what they made. The butterflies in her stomach started to do somersaults.

The girls watched, while Miss Merwood put directions on the board, gave out assignments, and told them where

to find everything they needed.

"Remember, girls," was Miss Merwood's final warning, "no conversation. Can't concentrate when you talk. Attend to the business at hand."

Donna recalled her mother's cheerful conversation in the kitchen. She certainly seemed to be able to cook and talk at the same time.

Everything moved smoothly for a few minutes. Donna learned that the toast was to be made in the oven, not in a toaster. She finally succeeded in lighting the oven without blowing anything up.

She peeked in at the toast, which was browning nicely. Karen was watching the milk, which was cooking on top of the stove. The blond girl looked at her just as the first bubbles began to show around the edge of the milk.

"Now?" Her lips formed the question.

Donna nodded, and Karen removed the pot from the stove.

At that exact second, Miss Merwood called, "Stop!" She clapped her hands smartly.

Karen made a move to put the pot of hot milk back on the stove.

"I said to stop!" said Miss Merwood. "That means

immediately." Karen stopped, and held onto the pot.

Donna looked at the other girls. One was bending in front of the open oven door, and the heat was making her quite flushed. Another had stopped with a dish held high in the air.

"They look as though they're playing a game of statues," thought Donna. "It's not only silly, it's downright dangerous."

She glanced at Karen, just in time to see the pot of milk slip out of her hand and crash to the floor.

Miss Merwood jumped. "Careless, plain careless," she muttered. But Donna saw that she had realized what might have happened. It was just lucky that Karen hadn't been badly burned.

Karen was sent to mop up the floor, and the other girls went back to their places.

"Can't afford more milk," Miss Merwood stated. "Too expensive. Those girls will have to eat plain dry toast. Next time be more careful."

Donna, who by now was as upset as Karen, suddenly felt great relief. No milk toast! She could have kissed Karen.

The dry toast was terribly hard to swallow, but at least

it wasn't swimming in hot milk.

As soon as they were out in the hall, Donna squeezed Karen's arm.

"You saved my life," she said. "I never could have eaten that old milk toast. And you really shouldn't worry. Miss Merwood couldn't possibly punish you, because she realized it was her fault."

But even with the almost happy ending, the morning had been an upsetting one. All during the day Donna kept thinking of the many cooking classes that stretched ahead. Only the thought of newspaper club that afternoon made her feel better.

Most of the staff members were already gathered in the newspaper office when Donna entered. She could tell from the buzz of conversation among the various groups that they were excited about something.

Mary and Karen beckoned to her.

"What's up?" asked Donna, joining them, and perching on a table top.

"The elections," Mary answered. "Donna, are you sure you think that we ought to vote for Joyce?"

Donna looked at the girls. "Is that what everyone's excited about?"

Mary nodded. "The way she struts around here, you'd think she'd just gotten elected Queen of England."

Karen nudged Mary. "They don't elect queens, silly."

"Well, you know what I mean. And everyone's getting mad at her. Especially the boys. It's just a shame one of them didn't work on a newspaper this summer."

Donna considered for a minute. If Joyce did things that annoyed the staff members, Donna would feel responsible. Should she change her mind, and say she would run for the office?

"I know how you feel about it, Donna," Karen was saying. "I told Mary that Joyce would still put out a good paper. That's what you said that day on your porch, and you were absolutely right. The paper is the important thing."

That settled that, thought Donna. No one need ever know that she had almost changed her mind at the last minute.

Miss Fischer strode into the room, her arms filled with books and papers. The girls watched her admiringly.

"It's nice to see somebody *young* around this place once in a while," whispered Mary.

"And she has the cutest clothes," added Karen.

"Ready for the elections?" Miss Fischer asked, as she seated herself at the desk in one corner of the tiny room.

Conversation ceased. Everyone slid into the chairs which had been assigned them.

Donna held her breath while nominations were made for editor. First Joyce's name, of course.

Then a boy whom she did not know raised his hand and said, "Donna Parker."

Miss Fischer started to write the name on the board. Donna gasped. She looked around. Everyone was waiting to see what she would do.

"I decline," she called out boldly.

There were no further nominations.

"Then Joyce Davenport is unanimously elected editor of the *Summerfield Sum-It-Up,*" said Miss Fischer.

"That means no one votes against her," whispered Karen.

The rest of the voting went as quickly. Donna could not refuse when Jack Kingston nominated her as assistant editor, and she could not help but be pleased when she too was elected unanimously.

Tommy Sheridan was the only nominee for science editor, and Donna did not know the boy and girl who

were chosen to be the sports editors.

When the voting was finished, Miss Fischer looked pleased.

"I think we have a fine staff," she said. "And I'm sure everyone on the staff, both editors and reporters, will do his utmost to make this the best newspaper that Summerfield has ever had.

"I think we've had enough work for one afternoon. See you at the next meeting."

She picked up her papers and books, waved gaily, and was out of the room before anyone else.

"I like her," said Jack admiringly. "I'll bet she'll even keep Joyce in line."

Everyone was getting up and drifting toward the door. Donna found herself walking with Tommy Sheridan.

"I'm glad you're at least assistant—" Tommy stopped in the middle of a sentence.

Donna looked at him. Then she followed his gaze. A strange man stood in the hall, leaning against the wall and looking about him. He was wearing an old soiled brown suit and a faded sport shirt. As he watched the students leave the newspaper office, he seemed to sneer.

Donna and Tommy walked quickly past him, and to-

gether raced down the steps toward the third floor.

Out of breath, they stopped on a landing.

"Who's he?" Donna asked.

"That's what I want to know," answered Tommy. "He certainly looked queer, didn't he? And did you notice the strange expression he had?"

"Could he be a parent?" asked Donna.

"Not in those dirty old clothes. They looked as though he'd been sleeping in them."

"I've never seen him in the halls before."

"A new janitor?" suggested Tommy.

"But he'd be wearing overalls, wouldn't he?"

The two walked slowly down the steps. "I thought I knew everyone in Summerfield," said Donna. "Even when a new family moves in, you always read about it in the paper."

"Whoever he is, he doesn't look as though he belongs here," mused Tommy. "You know, Donna, I think I have seen that man before—someplace. I just can't place him."

Tommy was quiet as they walked out of the school. Finally he said, "Donna, I can't leave here until I get another look at his face. I've got a very strange feeling about that man."

CHAPTER 4 *Another Stranger*

"Do you want to stay here with me and wait?" Tommy asked.

Donna nodded.

"You watch this door," suggested Tommy, "and I'll go around to the side door. If you stand out here on the walk, I can see you."

Minutes passed. Each time the door opened, Donna held her breath. But it was only a straggler, or a teacher working late. Donna waited, until finally the door remained closed for a long time. The school seemed deserted.

She started toward Tommy. He turned and saw her, and came in her direction.

"Any luck?" Donna asked.

Tommy shook his head. "I guess we might as well leave.

He probably went out the back door."

Donna nodded. "Anyhow, I'd better get home. My mother will be awfully worried about me."

"I'll go home your way, Donna, if you don't mind. It isn't any longer than the other way."

The two turned toward Elm Street. They were silent for a short time.

"What do you suppose he was doing on the fourth floor?" Tommy asked suddenly.

Donna didn't have to ask about whom Tommy was talking. She, too, had been thinking of the strange man.

"He didn't belong there, I'll bet," Donna replied. "And yet—and yet, he certainly doesn't seem to mind being seen. In fact, he stood right in the place where he was most likely to be seen."

"Or where he was most likely to see *us*," Tommy mused.

"That's right," Donna agreed. "Why in the world would he want to look at anyone on the newspaper staff, though?"

But it was something to think about. If Ricky were here, she would probably have a dozen stories about the man. Maybe he wanted to kidnap one of them, or maybe he was someone's brother who had been lost in the war,

or maybe he was a spy and was trying to get information to deliver to the enemy.

Gee, she was getting to be as bad as Ricky. She wondered how Ricky was getting along. It seemed so strange not to walk home with her every day. They didn't do their homework together any more, and even their telephone conversations were further and further apart.

Tommy had found a tin can, and was thoughtfully kicking it down the street as they walked.

"Do you have any plans for things for your science column?" she asked, realizing she had been quiet for a long time, and trying to make conversation.

"Well, I guess I'll have to think about it," Tommy answered. "Of course, we could always have questions and answers, or interesting facts. But I'd like to do something better than that."

There was silence again, as Tommy continued to kick at the can.

"How about you?" he asked. "What are you going to do as assistant editor?"

Donna opened her mouth, then closed it. "Hmm," she said, "I don't even know what I'm supposed to do. I guess I'll have to wait for Joyce to tell me."

"That's just great," said Tommy wryly. "I'll bet she gives you all the dirty work. She'll take all the exciting parts, where she can get her name in big letters. And she'll leave you all the hard part."

"Oh, Tommy," Donna objected, "that's not fair. You haven't given her a chance."

But her mind worked busily. Maybe it had been rather foolish to take the job. She had no idea what she had to do. It might be too hard for her. And if Joyce was as bad as everyone said, she would probably be terribly hard on her, and make all sorts of complaints. Oh, dear, now she had something else to worry about.

"Well, here we are," Tommy said, as they stopped in front of the Parker house.

"Oh!" Donna looked up, amazed. It must have been an awfully dull walk for Tommy. She certainly hadn't been very entertaining.

"I know it's sort of late now," Tommy said hesitantly. "I've got to go home, but—"

"Yes?" Donna did not know what he wanted to say.

"Well, we don't eat till about half-past six. Would there be time for us to do some algebra, if I come over in a little while? Tomorrow's assignment is pretty long."

Donna smiled. "Sure thing," she said. "That's one subject I can certainly use some help in. We'll have a little while, anyhow, before dinner is ready."

She waved as Tommy left. Maybe the walk home hadn't been too awfully boring, if he wanted to come over now.

"Mother!" she called, as she laid her books on the table in the front hall. "I'm home!" She started for the kitchen.

"No, dear," came Mrs. Parker's voice. "I'm in the living room."

Donna was a little surprised. What was her mother doing in the living room now? She was usually cooking dinner, or doing some sewing upstairs, or perhaps even working in the garden.

She stopped at the doorway to the room. Her mother was sitting in the large wing chair. And in the big blue chair, which was always called the "daddy chair," sat a strange man.

Two strange men in one day! Imagine!

But, except for that fact, there was no resemblance between the two men. The man who was here in the big chair was quite a bit younger. He had black hair with a slight wave in it, and dark eyes. And though Donna did

not know much about men's clothes, she was sure that his gray suit and figured tie must be very expensive. In every way, he seemed almost the opposite of the stranger at the school.

He arose and held out his hand to her. Donna was a little surprised to see how tall he was, and how broad his shoulders were.

Her mother had taken her by the arm, and was leading her over to the man. "This is Roger Norcross," said Mrs. Parker, and her eyes twinkled.

"How do you do," said Donna politely, as she took the man's hand. Then she sat down on the sofa.

"Doesn't the name mean anything to you, dear?" her mother asked.

Donna wrinkled her brow. She had been so busy looking at the man, that it took her a second to recall the name. Roger Norcross?

"Norcross? That was your name before you were married, Mother."

Mrs. Parker nodded. "You're on the right track, honey. Go ahead. Can't you guess?"

Donna looked at her mother in surprise. Something very odd indeed was going on here.

"Then I guess he's related to us," she said hesitantly.

Again her mother nodded. The man had not said a word.

Donna thought hard. A cousin? An uncle? Wait a minute. She remembered something now. There had been some pictures in the old family album. A little boy in an old-fashioned-looking suit, holding on to her mother's hand. And a few more pictures of the same little boy.

When she had asked about him, her mother had simply said, "That's my youngest brother." She had never said anything more, and Donna never learned what had happened to him.

"Roger?" She was almost afraid to ask. She turned to look at the man. "Are you my mother's brother?"

"I am indeed," was the answer.

Mrs. Parker laughed. "Isn't it exciting, Donna? I haven't even told your father yet."

"But—but I don't understand," Donna said.

"Neither did I, Donna. I was just as surprised as you were, dear, when I saw a strange man standing at the door. In fact, I must admit I actually didn't recognize him. You know, Roger, you were just a boy twelve years ago, and Donna was only a baby." Then she laughed. "Donna looks

so confused. I guess we'd better begin at the beginning." Mrs. Parker paused, as though she were thinking back over the years.

"You see, I'm quite a few years older than your uncle, dear. In fact, I always felt more like a mother to him than a sister. I can still remember how cranky he'd get when he was teething, and how slow he was learning to talk."

"Now, please," Donna's uncle said with a smile. "We don't have to go into all that, do we?"

"To go on," continued Mrs. Parker, "I guess it was a case of too many mothers. When Roger was in high school, he ran away from home. For months we didn't know whether he was alive or dead. The police, private detectives—no one could find a trace of him.

"Then one day a friend of the family happened to see him in California. He wrote to us, and we finally found Roger. But he still wouldn't come home. Everyone was hurt about that—they really were, you know, Roger—but we were so happy that he was all right that we didn't mind the rest too much."

"But haven't you heard from him since then?" asked Donna.

"Once in a while, dear. Grandma would get a card

from him, so we knew he was still in California."

Donna looked at her uncle. "Did you like it out there?" she asked politely. She really couldn't feel too friendly toward a man who had run off from his family, and treated them like that.

"Of course I expected you to read about me," Roger said, not really answering her question. "Surely you've heard of Roger Norcross?"

Donna and Mrs. Parker both looked blank. What were they supposed to know about him?

"Well," laughed the man, "I guess that just shows that I'm not nearly so important as I sometimes think I am."

"You must be quite a success, Roger, dear," said Mrs. Parker. "I always knew you would be. Once you made up your mind you were going to do something, nothing on earth would stop you."

"Do you have anything to do with movies?" Donna asked.

Mr. Norcross looked at her sharply. "What made you say that, Donna?" he asked.

"I just thought that you'd been living in California, and that's where they make movies. So I wondered if you had anything to do with them." But why had he snapped

at her like that? He certainly was touchy!

"A very good question, my dear. Yes, I'd say that I have something to do with movies."

Donna looked at her mother. That was an awfully queer answer. Was he teasing, or did he mean it? And if he was serious, did he mean he had a lot to do with them, or just a little? Donna felt very uncomfortable.

"Do you see all the movie stars?" she asked. Maybe he could get some autographs for her when he went back, she thought.

"We-ell—" Mr. Norcross hesitated.

"Donna, can't you see that Uncle Roger is tired?" interrupted Mrs. Parker. "I'm sure he doesn't want to talk business."

Then she turned to her brother. "What I want to know is how you found us, after all this time."

Mr. Norcross smiled. "Oh, that wasn't too hard. You've been living here for a good many years, haven't you? But then, I guess I'm the only gypsy in the family."

Donna was hardly listening to the conversation. This certainly was a strange turn of events. What kind of man would leave his family without even letting them know where to get in touch with him? And then one day,

simply walk in and say, "I'm here," giving no explanations for his behavior?

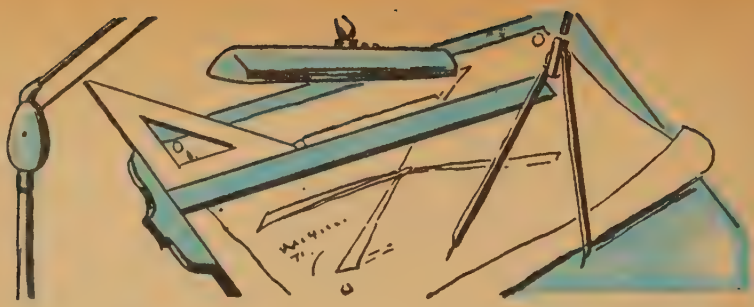
As for his work in California, he certainly wasn't a movie star himself, or she would have recognized him. And he didn't seem too sure about knowing the other stars, so he couldn't be a director or a producer or anything like that. And yet he said he was important.

"Maybe he made it all up," she thought. "Maybe he has nothing at all to do with the movies. Maybe he doesn't live in California either. Maybe—maybe he isn't even my uncle. Mother said she didn't recognize him until he told her who he was."

But what did he want with them? Even if he was her mother's brother, why had he come to Summerfield now?

The doorbell rang, and Donna jumped.

"I'll answer it," Mrs. Parker said. "You stay here and get acquainted with your Uncle Roger, dear."



CHAPTER 5 *Uncle Roger*

Mr. Norcross drummed on the arm of his chair with his fingers. He did not seem interested in making conversation. Indeed, he seemed to be listening intently to what was going on at the front door. Was he expecting someone?

Donna listened, too. In a minute Mrs. Parker was back in the living room, bringing someone with her.

Donna looked up. "Why, it's Tommy!" she said aloud. She had completely forgotten that he was supposed to come over to do algebra.

"This is Tommy Sheridan," Mrs. Parker said to Donna's uncle. "Tommy, this is Mr. Norcross, my brother, who has come all the way from California."

Then she turned to Mr. Norcross again. "Everyone in Summerfield is very proud of Tommy. He won second

prize in the Consolidated Electric Company contest this year."

Mr. Norcross looked up with interest. "That's quite good," he said, obviously impressed. "So you submitted a design, did you? And what was it that you decided to improve?"

Tommy blushed. "Aw, it was just a new idea for a helicopter," he said, looking down at his hands. "Not really a new design; it was only a new kind of blade for the propeller, so the air current—"

Mr. Norcross was sitting straight up in his chair. "Now, why in the world would you want to design something for a helicopter?" he asked in amazement.

Donna explained about Mr. Sheridan's helicopter factory.

"Oh, you're *that* Sheridan," said Mr. Norcross. "I've always been interested in helicopters, myself. I remember when people thought the whole idea was crazy. Now, of course, they're an important part of our air forces."

Donna sat on the sofa and listened, while Mr. Norcross and Tommy discussed the theory of aerodynamics, reversible pitch propellers, and all manner of technical things.

"Why," she thought, "I haven't the faintest idea what

they're talking about. Anyhow, why is Uncle Roger so interested in helicopters? I thought he said he had something to do with movies. This all looks pretty queer to me."

"I guess I've kept you long enough, Mr. Norcross," Tommy said at last. "I really came over here to do algebra with Donna. But it was fun talking to you."

"I enjoyed it, too, Tommy," said Mr. Norcross soberly. "Any time you have any other ideas about helicopters, I'd be very happy to discuss them with you."

As soon as they were in the hall, and out of earshot, Donna grabbed Tommy's arm.

"Don't you tell him a thing about your ideas, Tommy," she warned.

Tommy looked perplexed. "But, Donna, I didn't give away any secrets or anything. Anyhow, he's your uncle, isn't he?"

"That's just what I don't know."

Tommy's eyes opened wide. "You don't know? What do you mean?"

Donna told him the whole story. "My mother said she didn't even recognize him when she went to the door. Maybe he just knew my uncle, and decided to pose as him for some reason."

Tommy pooh-poohed the suggestion. "Gee, Donna, you sound as though you've seen too much television."

"But even if he is my uncle," she insisted, "why has he turned up now? What does he want? And why won't he tell us what he's been doing all these years? He's awfully mysterious about everything."

Tommy shook his head. "It does seem kind of strange, doesn't it?"

Algebra seemed very dull and uninteresting after the excitement of the afternoon, and they were glad to reach the end of their assignment.

Tommy said good-by politely to Mrs. Parker and to Mr. Norcross, and Donna walked out to the porch with him.

"Don't look so worried, Donna," said Tommy. "You're just imagining a lot of silly things. Anyhow, I've got a sure way to tell whether or not he's really your uncle."

"What's that?"

"Well—" Tommy hesitated. "Men are usually much more practical about things like this. So why don't you see what your father says when he comes home? Watch him very carefully the first time he looks at your uncle. That ought to give you a good clue."

Tommy picked up his algebra book, and was off down the street.

That was a very good idea, Donna thought. Let's see, she mused. Her mother had said she was a baby when Uncle Roger ran away. Her father must have known him for several years at least. She would have to watch his expression and see what she could tell that way.

The noise of the car on the gravel driveway a little while later warned Donna that her father was home.

"Daddy, Daddy!" she cried, rushing out to greet him.

"Hi, Donna," Mr. Parker said, slamming the car door behind him. "What's up? You look as though you just swallowed a keg of dynamite, and expected to explode at any minute."

Donna giggled. "There you go, teasing me again. You always know just from looking at me when I have something to tell you."

"Out with it, out with it," Mr. Parker commanded, in a stern tone. "Don't you know you may not have any secrets from your one and only father?"

"We've got company," Donna announced.

"Well now, that's fine. Anyone I know?"

"I—I don't know, Daddy." Then she dimpled. "Wait

and see. He's probably in the kitchen with Mother."

"Oh-ho," chuckled Mr. Parker. "So it's a man. Come on, don't keep me in suspense."

But Donna pulled him into the house. If she said another word, she would probably spoil the whole thing.

Sure enough, Mr. Norcross was seated comfortably at the kitchen table, watching Mrs. Parker prepare the salad for dinner. From the doorway, only the back of his head could be seen.

Donna watched her father's face carefully. He showed no sign of recognition. But of course, it was really too soon to tell.

Mrs. Parker whirled around. "I didn't hear you come home, dear," she said. "And I have such wonderful news for you."

Mr. Norcross stood up and came toward Donna's father. "It's good to see you after all these years, Sam."

Donna looked at her father intently, as the two men shook hands. Her father's wrinkled forehead showed plainly that he was trying to recall the name of the stranger.

"Now I feel better," Mrs. Parker laughed. "I would have felt simply terrible if you had recognized him right away, dear, when his own sister didn't know him."

Mr. Parker's mouth fell open, and his eyes widened.

"Oh, gee whiz," thought Donna. "Now she's gone and spoiled the whole thing. Now I'll never know whether Daddy really could tell who he was."

"Roger Norcross! After all these years!" Mr. Parker clapped his wife's brother on the back. "This certainly is a pleasant surprise. Whatever in the world brings you back to our part of the country? I thought you'd completely forgotten you had a family."

"Now, now, Sam," hushed Mrs. Parker, "that's all over and done with. He's back, and we're glad he is, and that's all there is to it."

"Oh, my goodness," thought Donna. "If they don't even ask him questions, how will I ever find out anything?"

Mrs. Parker was bustling about the kitchen. "Hurry and wash now, you men folks. Dinner will be ready in two minutes. And, Donna, will you call Jimmy? He's down the block, playing football with his gang."

In a few minutes, everyone was seated at the table in the dining room.

"Mm, smells good," commented Mr. Norcross, sniffing at the roast beef.

"You always did like roast beef, Roger," said Mrs. Parker.

"I'll never forget how you used to pack away three or four helpings every Sunday."

Mr. Norcross looked uncomfortable. Was it because he didn't like to be reminded of those days, or was there some other reason, Donna wondered.

"Tell us about California," said Jimmy. "Is it really summer all the time out there, Uncle Roger? Can you go swimming every day, honest?"

Mr. Norcross smiled. "Not really every day, Jimmy. Although I guess a loyal Californian shouldn't admit it. But we do go swimming almost until Christmas. In fact, all the seasons are different out there. It took me a long time to get used to it."

He went on to tell them about the number of houses that had swimming pools, and how different the houses looked out there from the ones in the East.

"Even the trees and the flowers are different, you know. There are so many kinds of palm trees, and orange and lemon and olive and avocado trees. I used to think it was wonderful to be able to grow gardenias and hibiscus and bird-of-paradise right in your own yard. But after a while, you get a little tired of all the brilliant colors and heavy perfumes. Especially if you've been raised in the East, as

I was. I'm so glad you don't have any geraniums here, Grace. They practically grow wild in California."

Jimmy began to get restless. He wasn't particularly interested in flowers and trees.

"Do you live in Hollywood, Uncle Roger?" he asked.

Donna noticed that her uncle did not answer the question directly. Instead, he told them about various parts of Los Angeles and its surroundings. Her head became dizzy with all the names—North Hollywood and Hollywood Hills and Pacific Palisades and Beverly Hills and Encino and Long Beach and Palm Springs.

"You've certainly seen a lot of places, haven't you?" she said when he paused for breath.

"But that's only a little bit of California, Donna. San Francisco is entirely different from Los Angeles. And in the other direction, if you drive for a few hours you're in Mexico."

"It sounds simply wonderful," said Mrs. Parker. "Maybe some day we'll be able to take a trip out there."

"Now that's enough about me," said Uncle Roger. Donna realized that when he wasn't talking about his past, or about the family, he could be a very charming person.

"Tell me about Summerfield," he went on. "It seems

like a nice quiet little town. What do you do for excitement?"

Donna waited for her mother or father to answer the question. She was sure her Uncle Roger would not be interested in junior high school affairs.

"It may seem like a sleepy little place to you, Roger, after all the excitement of Los Angeles," replied Mr. Parker. "But we're very fond of this town, and we always have plenty to keep us busy."

"Now, now, Sam," said Mrs. Parker. "Don't get touchy. Roger, you know how sensitive Sam has always been about things like that. But we really do have lots of excitement, although it probably wouldn't seem that way to you."

"Right now, for instance," Mr. Parker said, "we're getting ready for an election. In a place like this, where everyone knows everyone else, it means much more than it does in a large city. You really know for whom you're voting."

Donna looked down at her plate. Uncle Roger would certainly think they were awfully small-townish, hearing her parents talk that way. What was exciting about an election?

Surprisingly enough, Mr. Norcross seemed very much interested in the subject.

Donna and Jimmy sat and listened, while their uncle told of a recent campaign in Los Angeles.

"You know," he said, "with television and radio, even in a big city the candidates can reach a great many voters, and talk to them."

He went on to explain how an election for mayor was different in Los Angeles from almost any other city in the United States. Donna noticed that he talked with such enthusiasm that even Jimmy was listening to every word.

"There's very little talk of Republicans and Democrats there," he continued. "The main thing is that so many people are interested, and so many people vote. It's a shame that everyone doesn't realize how important his vote is."

Mr. Parker banged on the table, and everyone turned toward him.

"Roger, you've said a mouthful. If there were only some way to get kids like Donna here to realize how important voting is in a country like ours. I'll bet this is the first time she's ever even sat through talk of an election."

"She's still a little young, Sam," said Mrs. Parker, coming to the defense of her daughter. "And I think she and Jimmy learned a great deal from this discussion. Now why don't you two children run along, and let us older people talk?"

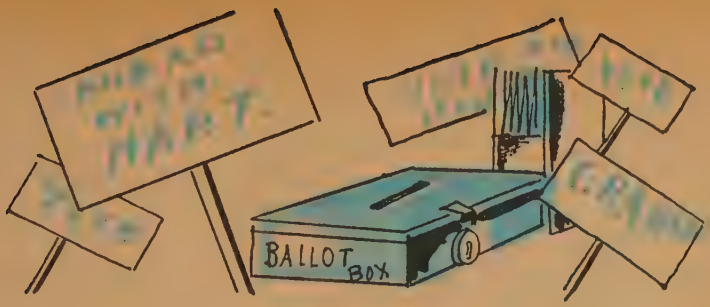
Donna and Jimmy excused themselves, and Donna picked up her school books from the hall table.

As she climbed the stairs to her room, her thoughts went back to the conversation at dinner.

Uncle Roger had made the election seem very interesting, and her mother was wrong about her being too young. She wasn't a baby any more.

Well, she thought, her new uncle certainly was a strange person. Movies and helicopters and elections—she had never heard so many queer things discussed before.

"I'm not sure who he is, or why he's here. But I'm sure about one thing," she said to herself, as she opened her science book. "He certainly will be interesting to have around."



CHAPTER 6 *The New Janitor*

"Ricky, Ricky!" Donna raced up Elm Street toward the school, in order to catch up with her friend.

Ricky turned around and waved. "Hi, Donna," she said, as Donna, panting, reached her side.

"I haven't seen you for so long, it's almost as though we lived in different cities," said Donna. Now, she thought, she would have a wonderful chance to talk over some of the things that had been bothering her. She always felt better after discussing things with Ricky.

"Did you hear about my long-lost uncle from California who arrived last week?" she began. Ricky would be sure to have a dozen different stories about who he was, and why he had come to Summerfield.

"Yes, I think I heard my mother talking about it," replied Ricky. But to Donna's surprise, she didn't seem

to be particularly interested in the subject.

"I'm really scared, Donna," Ricky went on. "I'm having a terrible time." Well, if Ricky had her own problems, Donna would show her what a good listener she could be.

"That's too bad," said Donna, with sympathy in her voice. "Can I help?"

"You know—or I guess you don't know—that the dramatics club is having tryouts in a couple of days. That's so the teacher can tell what sort of parts we'd do best, love interest or comedy or character parts. And I don't know what to recite for the tryouts."

"What are you allowed to do?" asked Donna, trying to think back over the plays she had seen.

"Oh, anything we want. I thought I'd do something by Shakespeare. But should I be Juliet? She's tender and romantic, and I could do:

'Good night, good night, parting is such sweet sorrow,
That I could say good night ere it be morrow.' "

She had a dreamy look, and a soft, faraway quality in her voice. Donna could almost picture moonlight on a balcony, and roses in her hair.

"That's good," she said. "Is there more to it?"

Ricky looked at her in surprise. "Why, of course. That's a whole long speech. But I'm not sure I should say that. How about my being Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice?* She's a woman lawyer, you know, and she stands in the courtroom and makes this wonderful speech about mercy:

> 'The quality of mercy is not strained.
> It droppeth as the gentle rain from heav'n
> Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:
> It blesseth him—' "

She stopped in the middle of a line. "I thought I knew more than that. Anyhow, I can just picture it. I'd wear a long black robe, and my hair very plain."

She turned to Donna. "Do you think I should be Juliet or Portia, Donna?"

Donna looked blank. "Gee, I don't know, Rick. Which do you feel more like?"

Ricky shrugged her shoulders. "I can feel like either of them."

Donna could see she had been no help. Maybe she had better change the subject.

"You were right about Joyce becoming editor of the paper, Ricky."

Ricky nodded. "I knew it. And I bet she wants to run the whole thing singlehanded."

"Well," Donna admitted, "she does have pretty definite ideas about the way things ought to be done. But she knows a lot more about those things than the rest of us. You should see how fast she can make up a headline that's the right length, or paste up a dummy."

"What does that mean?" asked Ricky.

Donna started to explain, then realized that Ricky wasn't really listening.

They had reached the school. "I'll tell you about it some other time," she finished lamely. "Anyhow, I'm glad I saw you this morning."

"Me, too," said Ricky, waving good-by. Donna wondered whether she really meant it. She was so caught up in the dramatics club, and other things that Donna had no part in. Donna sighed, when she remembered how, until now, they had shared every experience and practically every thought.

"Anyhow," she thought, as she headed toward the locker room to hang up her coat, "I'd feel plain silly in dramatics. I'm glad I chose being on the newspaper, even if Joyce is the editor. I wonder what fancy ideas she'll have at the meeting this afternoon."

But no one, not even Donna, was prepared for the bombshell that Joyce let loose at that afternoon's newspaper staff meeting.

"We want this to be the best year the *Summerfield Sum-It-Up* ever had," Joyce began. "And my father says that the thing that most newspapers do to interest the reading public—"

"Where does she get all those words?" whispered Karen to Donna.

"—is to run a series of articles on public housing, or gambling, or something like that. Now what I think we ought to do," Joyce continued, "is to think of a series of articles that we could run abo[illegible]mething going on in the school, so that everyone wo[illegible]erested in reading the paper. And if there's noth[illegible]cient interest, we'd have to plan a campaign. It w[illegible]t only make it a better paper, but we'd sell more copies."

"When should we have the ideas ready?" asked Tommy.

"I think we can spare a few minutes now for private discussions," Joyce replied. "Don't you, Miss Fischer?"

The adviser, who had been sitting quietly at her desk in the corner of the room, nodded. "I think we can arrange that." Donna wondered whether it was the sunlight on

Miss Fischer's face, or whether she really detected a twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

"You mean you want the ideas right now?" Mary Jefferson gasped.

"Of course," Joyce said coldly. "We'll have a recess of ten minutes for you to think of something. If you don't have any ideas at the end of that time, naturally I'll have to present my own ideas."

She walked back to her chair and sat down.

Mary, Karen, Tommy, and Jack Kingston quickly crowded around Donna.

"We've got to think of something; we've just got to," said Karen, wringing her hands in despair. "Otherwise that stuck-up Joyce will think she's the only one in this room who has a brain."

"I know," wailed Mary. "Oh, Donna, think of something."

Donna put her head in her hands. "What were the things Joyce said the regular newspapers used?" she asked after a minute.

"Public housing," mumbled Tommy. "I guess she means houses for people who can't afford to pay much rent. But what would that have to do with a junior high school?"

"And she said something about gambling, too," added Jack. "I've seen some boys playing cards in the locker room. Could we have something about that?"

The girls shook their heads. "I don't think that would look so good in the paper," said Mary. "Anyhow, the teachers and Mr. Greer are supposed to attend to things like that."

There was silence, as they looked from one to another. Karen darted off to the other groups, and was back in a few seconds.

"They don't have any ideas either," she reported glumly. "Joyce said if there wasn't anything interesting happening around the school, we'd have to make it happen, just so we'd have somethin[illegible]ite about."

"The ten n[illegible] up!" Mary reminded them. "Come on, w[illegible]et something, Donna."

Donna slid [illegible] chair. "Series of articles," she said half-alou[illegible]esting campaign." She sat upright in her chair. "Campaign!" She snapped her fingers.

"Donna! What is it? What are you thinking?" they asked together.

"Give me a minute. I think I've got it." She buried her head in her arms. Campaign, elections, the dinner-table

conversation, children being interested in voting, the importance of every vote. She had it!

"It's like this," she began.

Just then Joyce called, "Time!"

There was a groan heard throughout the room.

"I believe we're ready now," said Joyce. "Does anyone have any ideas?"

Karen leaned over to Donna. "She's so sure nobody does. She's just waiting to give her own ideas. We'll fool her. Hah!"

"Ssh!" warned Donna. "Give someone else a chance."

"Tommy?" asked Joyce. "Did you raise your hand?"

Tommy blushed. "I was just thinking—" Everyone turned toward him. He shook [redacted]ead. "Never mind," he said.

Joyce smiled. "Anyone else[redacted]

Donna timidly raised her ha[redacted]

"Maybe we could have an election. [redacted] real one, just make-believe."

"You mean a mock election?" supplied Joyce.

"Gosh," whispered Mary. "That makes me so mad. She always knows the right word. It makes us all look like a bunch of fools."

Donna went on, as though she had not heard Mary. "That's it, a mock election. The real elections will be held pretty soon, but there are so many people who never bother to vote. Maybe if we have our own election here, for mayor of Summerfield Junior High, or something like that, we could interest everyone in the school in it. Then they'd realize how important it is to vote, and when they're old enough, they'd all take part in real elections."

Steve raised his hand. "Maybe the art department could paint posters about the different people who are running for office, and we could hang them up around the building."

"And the shop department could make voting booths to put in the halls," suggested Jack.

"And the sewing class could make curtains for the booths," offered Mary.

"And we could have speeches, and parades, and everything," called someone from the back of the room.

Donna raised her hand again. "But the important thing would be that the newspaper could report what was going on. We could have articles about what the different candidates promised, and the reasons for voting, and all that."

"Maybe we could even try to have everyone in the school vote," said Jack. "One hundred percent turnout, you know."

The thing seemed to snowball. Joyce stood at the front of the room and listened dumbly.

Then Miss Fischer stood up.

"I think it's an excellent plan. Donna had a fine idea in starting this—" Joyce scowled at her—"and I'm glad to see that every one of you has contributed something." Everybody else smiled then.

"I think the important thing," Miss Fischer went on, "is to plan carefully and slowly. It would be a shame to spoil such a grand idea by going too quickly. Suppose we just let it rest until the next meeting. In the meantime, I'm sure you will all think of a great many more suggestions."

The meeting broke up. Everyone was still enthusiastic, and came over to congratulate Donna.

"Boy, did you see Joyce's face?" said one of the boys. "She almost died because someone else had a good idea."

"And did you notice that she was the first one out the door when the meeting was over? I guess she doesn't feel like such a big shot now," said Mary.

"But Miss Fischer gave all of us credit for our ideas," said Donna.

Finally the other members left. Only Donna and Miss Fischer remained.

"I've never seen a small-town election before," said Miss Fischer. "I'll be interested in the one in Summerfield."

"Oh," said Donna. "Did you live in a big city before you came here?"

"About the biggest," smiled Miss Fischer. "New York City has over seven million people."

"Seven million. Wow!" said Donna. "That really is big."

"Oh, I like towns this size," said Miss Fischer. "And I'm sure I'll like it even better when I get to know more people. After all, I've been here a very short time. And I must say everyone has been most friendly."

But Donna could see that, though she was cheerful about it, Miss Fischer must find life a little lonely.

"That's a shame," she thought. "She's such a nice person, and young and pretty. It must be awfully hard to be a teacher in a strange town."

Tommy burst into the newspaper office.

"I thought you'd gone home, Tommy," said Miss Fischer, looking up.

Tommy stopped short. "Oh, I didn't think you'd be here, Miss Fischer. I just wanted to see Donna for a minute." He seemed quite upset.

"I'm leaving now," the teacher said, gathering her papers together.

"No, no, that's all right," said Tommy. "I didn't mean it that way. It's only that—" He held up a roll of blue papers with white lines. Donna recognized them as the set of plans on which he had been working.

"Remember I told you a long time ago that I was working on some new ideas for my father's helicopter? I had gotten permission from the teacher to work on them in school."

Donna listened intently. What had happened?

Tommy continued. "I was always very careful to roll them up a certain way, and double the rubber band around them so they wouldn't unroll. When I went to get them after the meeting, they were rolled differently, and the rubber band was not doubled."

"Now, now," said Miss Fischer, trying to soothe him. "Maybe you were in a hurry and forgot. No one would touch your plans, I'm sure."

"But they did! I know they did!" he said.

The door to the office swung open. A man wearing work clothes, and carrying a large burlap bag, entered.

"Oh, it's just the janitor," Donna breathed.

Then she looked at him again. Where had she seen him before? Why, he was the strange man that she and Tommy had seen in the hall! So he was the janitor after all.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Brown," Miss Fischer said. "Do you like your new job?"

Mr. Brown merely grunted, emptied the waste baskets into the bag, and trudged off.

"Do you know him?" asked Tommy, who had also recognized the man.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Fischer. "He came to Summerfield the same day I did. In fact, he was on the same bus. He didn't have a job then, but he was sure he was going to work in Summerfield, no matter what he had to do."

The teacher, Donna, and Tommy went out into the hall.

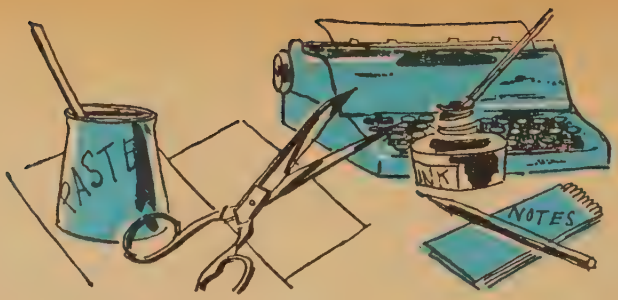
"He certainly was a determined person," Miss Fischer continued. "As soon as he learned I was coming here, too, he asked me so many questions about the town. He wanted to know all about it. I wonder why he picked this place to live in, because he doesn't know a soul here. Well, I'm glad he found a job, anyhow."

"Have you remembered where it was that you first saw Mr. Brown?" asked Donna, after Miss Fischer had left them at the stairway.

"Huh?" asked Tommy, his mind obviously not on what Donna had said.

"You know," insisted Donna. "You thought you had seen him some place before."

"Oh, that," answered Tommy. "No, I haven't the faintest idea. Right now I'm worrying about my plans for the new helicopter. Who do you suppose has been tampering with them?"



CHAPTER 7 *Donna Becomes Editor*

Whatever Mr. Brown's reason for coming to Summerfield, he seemed a quiet enough person. Donna and Tommy tried to keep an eye on him for several days, but could learn nothing more about him.

"Whenever I see him in the halls I try to start a conversation with him," remarked Donna to Tommy one afternoon, as they were walking up the school stairs to the newspaper office. "But all he does is grunt. He never even answers my questions."

Tommy nodded. "I know. All I could find out about him was what Miss Fischer had already told us. He doesn't go any place or do anything. He even stays here some nights, to tend the furnace. The head janitor—you know, that fat man who's always kidding with us—told me he volunteered to stay because he had no place to go."

"Maybe you're right about my seeing too much television, or too many movies, Tommy," Donna sighed. "He's probably a perfectly ordinary man with no family."

They walked the rest of the way up to the fourth floor in silence.

As they reached the door to the newspaper office, Donna sighed again. "It seemed that there were so many exciting things about to happen, but none of them ever did. I'm even beginning to be convinced now that Roger Norcross really is my mother's brother, although I still don't know why he suddenly appeared in Summerfield."

"I know what you mean," agreed Tommy. "Maybe I was wrong about my blueprints, too. I'm sure no one would have any reason to look at them. The other boys don't know very much about helicopters, and there certainly aren't any aeronautical engineers floating around here."

Suddenly the door to the newspaper office swung open and Jack Kingston grabbed Donna's arm.

"Are you going to stay out there in the hall gabbing all day?" he asked, as he propelled her into the room. "Hurry up! Miss Fischer wants to see you right this minute. Big news!"

Donna looked at the faces of the few staff members who

had already gathered in the office. From their expressions she was sure that the news was not good.

Miss Fischer was sitting at her desk.

"Sit down, Donna. I have something to tell you," she said, drawing a chair up beside her own.

Donna sat down, and leaned forward expectantly.

"It's about Joyce," Miss Fischer began.

"Joyce Davenport? Has something happened to her?"

Miss Fischer toyed with a pencil on her desk.

"She's been in a bad accident, and is in the hospital now. Her father called the school a little while ago. He didn't give many details, but from what he said I imagine she won't be back to school for some time. The doctor knows that her leg is broken, and more X-rays will be taken in the morning. We'll probably learn in a few days just how serious the situation is."

"Oh, dear!" Donna didn't know what to say. "Oh, that's too bad! I'm so sorry."

Miss Fischer smiled. "Of course you are. Now don't worry about it. I'm sure everything possible is being done for her, and I'll let you know as soon as I have any further news."

Donna stood up, not sure whether Miss Fischer expected

anything more of her. Then she moved over to join her classmates.

"Did she tell you?" whispered Tommy.

Donna nodded. "How do you suppose it happened?" she asked in a low tone.

"She probably had her nose so high up in the air that she couldn't see where she was walking," said Mary Jefferson.

"Why, Mary!" Donna gasped. "That's a dreadful thing to say. How can you be so cruel?"

Mary shrugged her shoulders.

Karen came to her defense. "She didn't mean it the way it sounded, did you, Mary? We're all awfully sorry it happened."

"But I know how Mary feels," added Jack Kingston. "It's about time something happened to that girl to make her realize she's a plain ordinary human being like the rest of us."

Donna arose and picked up her books. "I refuse to stay and listen to things like this. Goodness knows Joyce isn't my best friend, but I don't see how anyone can enjoy seeing someone else suffer."

She started to leave the room, but Karen ran after her.

"Come on back, Donna. We promise not to say nasty things again. Anyhow, you can't leave *now*."

Donna turned toward the little blond girl. "And why not, may I ask?" She drew herself up to her full height. "There isn't a thing that I can think of to keep me here."

Karen's eyes widened. "Why, Donna! You've got to make plans. After all, you're the acting editor now."

Donna sank down into the nearest chair. For a second she was speechless.

"Oh, me, oh, my!" she breathed. Her thoughts raced. She had tried so hard to have Joyce elected editor, because she felt that she herself did not have the experience for the job. It looked as though Fate was stepping in and deciding otherwise.

And no wonder Miss Fischer had appeared to expect her to say something else, when she told her about Joyce. Miss Fischer probably thought she understood that this meant she was to take over the job of editor. How stupid could she be?

"But—but—" Donna floundered for words.

"But nothing!" replied Karen firmly. "You're the editor now. And I'm sure you'll do just as good a job as Joyce ever could."

"Did I hear you say 'just as good'?" asked Tommy. "I'll bet it'll be much better."

"And we'll certainly like it a lot more," muttered Jack.

"Now, now," warned Karen. "None of that. You don't want Donna to walk out again, do you?"

"Just tell us what you want us to do, Donna," said Mary, trying to make peace.

"That's right," said Tommy. "We'd better get started on that election thing pretty soon. Time's a-wastin'."

"Give me a chance to catch my breath," said Donna. "How about my letting you know what to do by tomorrow?"

"All right," agreed the others.

"But no later," said Karen. "We're all ready to start work."

"Goodness," laughed Donna. "I never saw such an eager bunch of workers."

They waved good-by to Miss Fischer and walked downstairs together.

"Well," said Tommy, after the others had left, and he and Donna were on their way home, "I guess you don't have to complain now about not having any excitement, do you?"

"I'm worried, though," Donna admitted. "Having an election campaign was my idea, but it seems a lot different when you actually have to do the work on it."

Thoughts of her new responsibility weighed heavily on Donna. Twice during dinner her mother had to remind her that she had not finished eating. She found it hard to keep her mind on her homework assignments. And she tossed and turned far into the night, trying to think of ways to start the new project.

"How in the world can you interest a whole junior high school in having an election?" she kept asking herself.

And she continued to ask herself that question for several days.

After much scribbling of charts and plans and names, she finally succeeded in giving each staff member an assignment in connection with the campaign.

Each department in the school was asked to contribute something, and Donna herself offered to talk to Mr. Greer about the idea.

Although the principal's office always scared her a little, Mr. Greer did not seem to notice, and listened intently to what she had to say.

"Hm, hm," he kept muttering. When she had finished,

he was quiet for a minute or two.

"Oh, dear," thought Donna mournfully. "I've probably done it all wrong, and he'll say No."

But Mr. Greer, after stroking his chin thoughtfully, surprised her by saying, "Yes. Yes, I think it's a fine idea. Of course, you realize this is extra work, and the various departments may do as much or as little as they please. But I feel that everyone should realize the importance of voting, and I will cooperate in any way I can."

"He even shook hands with me," reported Donna delightedly to the assembled staff. "Was that a relief!"

The reports from the other people were just as encouraging. They had decided previously that only seniors should run for office, since being mayor of the school would be even more important than being president of a class.

Mary Jefferson reported that the home-room teachers would allow time for nominations. The English teachers, said Jack Kingston, would help the candidates with their speeches. Bill Blanchard announced that the art department would make signs for the nominees. Tommy said that the shop department had agreed to make voting booths to be put in the halls just before election time.

"I think everyone is cooperating just wonderfully," said

Donna. "Karen, how did you make out?"

Karen blushed. "My main problem was getting her to listen to me. She kept saying, 'To the point, please. Too much to do to waste time. What is it you want? Quickly now!' "

Several people tittered. They knew that Karen's job had been to talk to Miss Merwood, the cooking teacher.

"But when I told her what we were doing, she was really very nice. And when she found out that we just wanted her classes to serve something to drink to the people who would stay late to count votes, she offered to do even more. She said the girls could make doughnuts and cookies, too. Imagine!"

"Oh, Karen, that's wonderful. We'll be able to tell everyone who stays late that they'll get free refreshments. That ought to help!"

The staff was elated. "Boy, we're really going to set this old school back on its heels," said Jack.

"And this is only the beginning," nodded Tommy.

"Donna, old girl, you've done it again," added Bill Blanchard. "Wait'll we begin with pep rallies and parades and things!"

"Hold everything, now," warned Donna. "Don't get too

excited. This is only the very first step. We have a long way to go."

But she herself could not help but be a little excited. Things really did seem almost too smooth. Of course she couldn't brag to anyone outside her family. Otherwise they would think she was beginning to get like Joyce. If only Ricky were around! She would be sure to understand how pleased Donna was, without thinking that success had gone to her head.

The very next time she saw Ricky at lunch hour, she went over to her table. "Hi, Ricky," she began. "Can I talk to you a minute about something?"

"Sure, Donna," the red-haired girl answered. "I've really been meaning to call you. But you know how it is—" Her voice trailed off.

"Maybe you can come over after school today," offered Donna eagerly. "There's so much I'd like to talk to you about."

"Today?" Ricky raised her eyebrows. "Well, I'm not sure. I'll tell you what—I'll let you know after school. Will that be all right?"

"Of course," agreed Donna. "I'll meet you in the front hall, right after last class."

When the final bell rang, Donna raced to her locker room for her coat, and then down to the front hall. "See, I was imagining things again," she said to herself. "Ricky will come over to my house, and it'll be like old times again. I'm sure she'll be interested in the campaign. And I'll have to give her a chance to tell me about dramatics, too."

But when Donna reached the front hall, Ricky was already there, surrounded by a group of girls. They were all chattering excitedly, although Ricky seemed to be the leader.

Then Ricky saw Donna. She motioned to the other girls, and as Donna approached the group, all conversation ceased.

"Hi, Donna," said several of the girls. Then there was silence. Donna could feel their eyes on her.

"Can you come?" she asked Ricky quietly.

"Gee, Donna, I'm afraid not," Ricky answered. "You see, we have an awful lot of homework, and I'd better get right home." She seemed very much embarrassed.

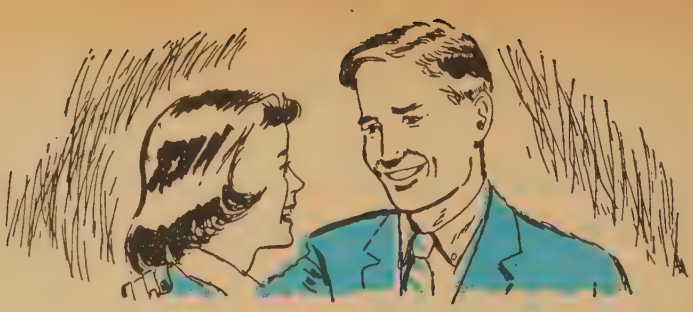
"That's all right," said Donna. She felt the tears stinging her eyes, but determined to let no one see them. "Some other time, maybe." She waved good-by, and was off.

The group of girls remained behind, and Ricky made

no move to leave them. Donna could hear the buzzing begin again.

"For someone who has so much homework, she doesn't seem to be in a terrible hurry," thought Donna. "She might have thought of a better excuse than that, if she didn't want to be with me."

What was the matter? Why wouldn't the girls talk to her? She had counted them all among her good friends. Even though she tried so hard to remain the same, did they think that she was beginning to act like Joyce? What had she done?



CHAPTER 8 *Ricky's Invitation*

The walk home seemed endless. What was happening to her? Only that afternoon everything had seemed so wonderful. The campaign was going well, everyone was working hard, and she was beginning to feel that maybe she could manage the job as editor after all. Miss Fischer had been a darling, and without appearing to meddle at all, had given her a great deal of help.

And now this! Were people talking about her now, as she had heard them talk about Joyce? It really wasn't fair. She didn't see what she had done that was wrong. Or perhaps—perhaps it wasn't that at all. Perhaps the girls had an entirely different reason for not wanting her to join them!

Donna dejectedly closed the front door after her, and listlessly laid her schoolbooks on the hall table.

"Is that you, Donna?" called Mrs. Parker.

"Yes, Mother, I'm home."

Mrs. Parker appeared in the hall, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel.

"Why, Donna, dear, what's the trouble? Has something happened? You sound so sad."

"Oh, Mommy, I feel sad, too," Donna blurted out. "Everything was coming along so nicely, and then this had to happen."

"Tell me, dear. What did happen to make you feel like this?"

"The girls—you know, the ones I was always so friendly with, Anne and the rest of them—they just don't talk to me any more. Even Ricky—she simply stopped talking when I came near her."

Mrs. Parker wrinkled her brow. "I don't understand, dear. Tell me exactly what happened."

Donna recited the incident to her mother. "And as soon as I had gotten a little distance away, they started to whisper again. Oh, Mother, doesn't anybody like me now?"

"Why, Donna! That's plain silly. Of course they like you, very much. Perhaps they were merely discussing something that didn't concern you. Now don't worry about it

for a single second. Everything will be all right."

She patted Donna on the shoulder in an absent-minded way, and went back to the kitchen. Donna followed her mother.

"I'll bet she hardly heard a word I said," thought Donna. "That wasn't like Mother a bit. All she said was 'Don't worry' instead of sitting down and talking things over with me."

Donna stood forlornly in the kitchen, leaning against a cupboard door. She watched as her mother grated carrots for a salad.

"Where's Uncle Roger?" Donna asked suddenly. He usually watched her mother prepare dinner, although Donna was sure he stayed in the kitchen just to be near the telephone. She had noticed that every time the phone rang he jumped, as though to answer it.

"He's gone," answered her mother.

Donna stared at her mother. "Gone? You mean he won't be back? What happened, Mommy?"

Mrs. Parker rinsed raisins in a strainer, and added them to the carrots. "I'm sure he'll be back, dear, but I don't know when. He did leave in quite a hurry. A telephone call came for him a little while after you left for school

this morning. It was a long distance call, from New York, I think. He didn't tell me very much—just that it was a business call that he'd been expecting, and that he had to leave immediately."

So she had been right about the telephone call! "But didn't he say how long he'd be gone, Mother? Goodness, a person can't simply walk off and leave that way, with you not knowing when he'll be back or anything."

Mrs. Parker smiled. "I guess it does seem strange to you, doesn't it, dear? But after all these years, I expect almost anything from Uncle Roger. He was always a very strange boy, wandering off whenever he felt like it. It always amazed me that Grandma didn't worry about him more than she did."

"It would certainly worry me," commented Donna.

"Grandma used to say that boys as smart as Roger were different from other people, and it was wrong to expect them to act the same way."

"I didn't know he was so smart," said Donna, in wonder. "What did he do?"

"He never talks much about himself," said Mrs. Parker. "But he did wonderful work in science, especially in high school. He was always inventing things. I still remember

his room at home, littered with motors and wires and all kinds of queer things."

"Sort of like Tommy Sheridan?"

"That's right, dear. Except that Uncle Roger always wanted to be on his own. He never liked people prying into what he was doing. That's why I still don't know exactly what kind of work he does in California. But I'm sure that one day the whole world will know about him."

"Gosh," sighed Donna. "Imagine my having an uncle like that. We're just plain, ordinary people. How did he ever get into a family like this?"

"It does seem strange, doesn't it, honey?" Mrs. Parker pulled out the potato bin, and selected four potatoes. Donna watched while she carefully pared them, put them in a saucepan, and added water and salt. "It almost seems as though he doesn't belong to us, doesn't it?" her mother added.

Donna nodded. "I'd better start on my homework, Mommy," she said.

"Dinner will be ready in about an hour, dear," called Mrs. Parker as she left the room. "And, Donna, I wouldn't worry about Uncle Roger, or about the girls at school, either. I'm sure everything will turn out all right."

Donna picked up her books from the hall table, and trudged up to her room. She kept thinking of the conversation about her uncle. What had her mother said? "It almost seems as though he doesn't belong to us." So her mother felt that way about him, too! She wished she could learn more about him. There must be some mystery, somewhere, that accounted for his strange behavior.

Time passed quickly. Donna was startled to hear her mother's voice, calling her.

"Oh, an hour couldn't have passed that quickly, could it?" she thought in panic. "Why, I'm not even half through these algebra problems."

Then she heard footsteps on the stairs, and a knock on the door. "Come in," she called, and the door was flung open.

"Why, Ricky West!" she said in amazement. "I didn't know you were here. Is that why Mother called me?"

"Hi, Donna. Yes, she just wanted to tell you I was on my way up. Is it all right for me to come in?"

"Of course," said Donna, leading her friend into the bedroom. Then she could resist the temptation no longer. "Did you finish all that homework you had to do?"

Ricky's face became almost as fiery as her hair. "I—we

—oh, yes, at least most of it," she answered lamely. "Anyhow, I came to ask you something."

"Oh, dear," thought Donna. "Here it comes. Now I'll find out what the trouble is."

"Could you—would you like to—I mean, can you come to my house for dinner next Friday evening?"

Donna's mouth fell open. She certainly had not expected this. Was Ricky trying to make up for this afternoon? She seemed awfully embarrassed again.

"Gee," she said, "I'd love to, Ricky. But I'll have to ask my mother first."

"Oh, your mother will—" Ricky began. Then she closed her mouth firmly. "Yes, I guess you'd better ask her," she finished.

The two girls went downstairs together.

"Mother, Ricky would like me to come to her house for dinner next Friday night. May I go?"

Mrs. Parker did not turn around to answer. "Would you like to go, Donna?" she asked.

Donna noticed her mother's eyes stray to the large calendar hanging on the wall above the sink.

"Next Friday—" Donna said, and she found the date on the calendar. "Why, Mother, that's my birthday!"

Mrs. Parker nodded. "Yes, dear, I know. But I think you're getting too big for parties and things, don't you? Maybe you'd have just as good a time having dinner with Ricky."

That was strange, thought Donna. Now her mother was doing it, too. She had never heard her talk like that before. Why, birthdays were practically sacred in the Parker household. She had known her father to postpone business trips, and her mother to give up her regular card game, because of a birthday in the family. What was happening to everyone?

"Come on, Donna," urged Ricky. "You can come over early, and we can talk until dinner. It'll be fun."

Donna nodded, but there was a lump in her throat. "All right," she said. Then she smiled. "That'll be just fine, Rick. Thanks a lot for asking me."

When Ricky had left, Donna returned to her room. She really should be awfully glad that Ricky had asked her; it meant that they were still friends. Why had what her mother said about her birthday taken all the joy out of the invitation? Was growing up always so hard?

Well, she would go to Ricky's next Friday. And she would have a good time, too! That would show everyone!

CHAPTER 9 *A Birthday*

"Come right in, Donna," called Miss Fischer from her desk in the newspaper office.

"I didn't know whether I'd find you here or in your regular classroom," Donna explained. "Several people told me that you wanted to see me. Is anything wrong?"

"We've received further news about Joyce Davenport," began Miss Fischer. "And since you are directly concerned, I wanted to let you know immediately."

"Thank you, Miss Fischer. How is she?"

"In a way she's better than they expected; in another way, I guess the news isn't so good. Luckily Joyce's leg was the only part of her that was affected by the accident. But when Mr. Davenport called the school, he told Mr. Greer that the leg bone was worse than they had thought at first. In fact, the doctors haven't even been able to put it in a

cast. Joyce's parents are quite concerned."

"But isn't she in the hospital, Miss Fischer?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. She'll be there for quite a while. Right now her leg is in traction."

"You mean it's hung up from the ceiling with all those ropes and weights and things? Gee, that must be awfully uncomfortable."

"I'm sure it is, Donna. But that has to be done to set the bone properly. Otherwise one leg would be shorter than the other, and poor Joyce would be crippled for the rest of her life."

"Ooh!" Donna shivered. "It must be simply dreadful. How long will she have to be that way?"

"For several weeks, I think," answered Miss Fischer. "Then, as I understand it, as soon as the leg can be put in a cast, she will be sent home."

"Does that mean she'll be able to come to school in a few weeks?"

"I'm afraid not, Donna. As long as the cast is on, she'll have to be in bed. When the cast is ready to come off, the doctors will X-ray her leg again at the hospital, and remove the cast there. No, I don't believe Joyce will be back at school for quite a while."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Donna. "About how long do you think it will take, Miss Fischer?"

"Her father said that she probably won't return to school until after Christmas. And so, Donna," finished Miss Fischer, rising from her desk, "you may as well get used to the idea of being editor of the newspaper until Christmas time."

Donna left the office slowly. Editor until Christmas time! That was much longer than she had expected. Still, she was managing better than she had ever thought she could. And she really had no right to feel sorry for herself. It was Joyce she should feel sorry for. Imagine having to stay in bed for so long!

"I'll see whether I can get some of the boys and girls to go over with me and visit her," she thought. "I'm sure she'll be awfully lonely."

But when she mentioned the idea, it was greeted coldly.

"We do feel sorry about the accident," said Karen. "But honestly, Donna, I wouldn't know what in the world to say to her, if I went to visit. I never could carry on a conversation with Joyce."

As much as Donna argued, she still could get no one to go with her to see Joyce.

"We'll do anything you say," said Mary Jefferson, "and we'll work as hard as we can on the paper, but please don't keep talking to us about Joyce."

And when Donna discussed it with her mother, to her surprise Mrs. Parker agreed with Mary. "You just can't lead other people's lives for them, dear. I agree with you that it would be nice for a whole group of girls and boys to go, but if they won't, you'll have to drop the subject and visit Joyce yourself."

Donna resolved not to mention the matter again. Instead, she called Mrs. Davenport, who seemed delighted to hear from her, and who said she would make arrangements with the hospital to have Donna see Joyce the following Saturday.

"That's two engagements for me on the calendar, Mother," said Donna, as she came into the kitchen after calling Mrs. Davenport. She picked up a red crayon, and put a circle around a number.

"Two engagements, Donna? What are they?" asked Mrs. Parker.

"Mrs. Davenport said I could go to see Joyce next Saturday, so I'm marking that day," explained Donna. "And next Friday is already marked."

"Friday? Already marked? Did I do that?" asked Mrs. Parker in a startled tone.

"Of course not, Mommy," said Donna patiently. "I marked it. Don't you remember? That's the day I go to Ricky's for dinner."

"That's right," nodded her mother. "I had forgotten."

"Gee," thought Donna. "It's also my birthday. But I guess she's forgotten that, too."

She tried hard not to think of the calendar, and the red circle around that important day. But the following Friday she awoke with the feeling that something special was going to happen.

"It's just because of the blue October sky," she said to herself, trying to calm the feeling of anticipation which welled up within her. "I'm sure no one but me remembers that today is my birthday."

She resolved to act as though it were a day like any other day.

"Good morning, Mother," she said as she entered the kitchen.

"Hi, Sis," Jimmy broke in. "Hurry and sit down. Mom and Pop have been waiting and waiting for you to come down. Anyhow, I want to see what's in the packages."

Donna looked at the breakfast table. There, beside her plate, were two boxes colorfully wrapped in gay paper and ribbons.

"Oh, Mother, you really did remember after all," Donna cried.

"You didn't think we'd forgotten your birthday, did you, honey?" asked Mrs. Parker in surprise.

Donna gave her mother a quick hug.

"How about me?" asked Mr. Parker, pretending that his feelings were hurt. "Doesn't a mere father get a birthday kiss?"

"Oh, Daddy!" Donna flew over to him, nearly knocking the cup of coffee out of his hand. She kissed the top of his head, and leaned down to throw her arms around his neck. "Oh, thank you so much for remembering me."

"Hey!" said Jimmy, in a tone of disgust. "Why all the huggin' and kissin'? You haven't opened the presents yet. Maybe you won't even like them."

Mr. Parker turned to his son. "I'm glad your sister isn't as mercenary as you are, my boy."

"What d'you mean?" asked Jimmy, scowling.

"He just means," answered Donna, seating herself at the table, "that all you think about is money, and how much

things cost. I'd kiss Mother and Daddy even if I didn't like the presents." She clapped her hand over her mouth. "But I'm sure I will like them," she added hastily.

"You won't know until you open them," Jimmy reminded her. "Here, I can get the ribbon off faster than you can." He grabbed a package.

"Never mind," said Donna, pulling it away from him. "It's my birthday, and I'll open them, if you don't mind."

"Children, children!" said Mrs. Parker, in despair. "You're surely not quarreling today, too, are you?"

Jimmy settled back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and out of the corner of his eye watched his sister carefully untie the ribbon on the first package. She laid it neatly aside, then took off the paper, folded it, and opened the box.

" 'To Donna from Mother,' " she read. Then she carefully lifted out a nylon slip.

"Oh, underwear!" exclaimed Jimmy, wrinkling up his nose.

"It's not 'underwear,' " answered Donna. "It's a perfectly beautiful slip. And look what else! A nightgown and a pair of panties. And everything matches!"

"Do you like it, dear?" asked her mother.

"Like it? Why, Mommy, I feel just like a bride." She kissed her mother several times. "Oh, thank you so much."

"Come on, come on," said Jimmy impatiently. "There's still another package. And it's even bigger."

Donna lifted the other package. "And it's heavy," she said. "I wonder what can be in it."

When she opened the box, she let out a squeal. "Ooh, Daddy! A desk set, all for my very own. Look, it has a blotter, and a calendar, and a pen, and everything. Oh, it's just what I wanted."

"Now that's what I call a present," said Jimmy admiringly.

"I'm glad you like it, dear," said her father, patting her hand.

"I-uh-we-uh—" mumbled Jimmy, his ears becoming red. Donna, Mrs. Parker, and Mr. Parker all turned toward him.

Jimmy fumbled in his pocket, brought out a bright green object, and laid it on the table before his sister.

"It's an ash tray," he explained. "We made it in school, out of clay. The teacher even baked it for us in a kind of oven. It was supposed to be for Pop, but I didn't have any money to buy a present for you—" he swallowed hard.

"Why, Jimmy," said Donna. "It's perfectly lovely. I can

use it as a dish for pins and things on my bureau."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Jimmy muttered.

Donna leaned over, and kissed him on the cheek. He quickly wiped the spot with the back of his hand, but she could tell that he was pleased.

"Hey, don't do that," he said. "What'll the guys think, with girls kissin' me? Anyhow, I got to get to school."

"My goodness, yes," said Mrs. Parker, startled. "You'd all better run. We completely forgot about the time."

"Mother—" Donna hesitated. She had had such a lovely morning, it didn't seem right not to be home for dinner that evening. She would tell Ricky she simply couldn't be away from home on her birthday.

"About Ricky's tonight, Mother—" she began.

Mrs. Parker interrupted. "Oh, yes, dear. I've been meaning to speak to you about that. Instead of going to all the trouble of coming home, and then going to Ricky's, why don't you go there right after school? The two of you can walk home together, and it will give you much more time to be with each other. Don't you think that's a good idea?"

Donna swallowed hard. So her mother didn't want her home at all. Apparently she wouldn't be missed, even on her birthday.

Then she scolded herself. After all, her mother was doing it to be especially nice to her. She thought that Donna would prefer to be with Ricky.

"Yes, Mother, that'll be wonderful." She smiled a half-hearted smile. "I won't be home very late; I'll leave right after dinner."

"Don't worry, dear," called Mrs. Parker, as Donna took her jacket from the hall closet. "Take your time getting back."

"That's a queer thing for Mother to say," Donna thought, racing down the front steps. "She must be trying awfully hard to be nice to me today."

Yet, at the end of the school day, Donna was glad of her mother's suggestion. Ricky had seemed delighted at the idea of Donna's coming home with her.

"In fact," Ricky said, as the girls met at the appointed place in the front hall, "I was going to suggest it myself."

Ricky had never been more friendly. She listened with interest to the newest developments in the election campaign.

"Everyone is getting awfully excited about the election, Donna," Ricky told her. "Do you have any idea who will run for office?"

Donna shook her head. "Not the faintest idea. The campaign won't really start until the candidates are narrowed down to one boy and one girl."

"Boys against girls?" Ricky squealed. "Wow! Wait'll we show those boys whose votes are more important. Why, women can carry any election. Even my mother said so."

Donna squirmed. "Gee, Ricky, it doesn't absolutely have to be boys against girls. But," she admitted, "that's probably the way it'll turn out."

The conversation continued all the way home and up to Ricky's bedroom. The girls covered every subject from school work to the latest songs. Suddenly Donna noticed that it was quite dark. Ricky got up to turn on the light in her room.

"I wonder what time the Wests eat dinner," Donna mused. "I'm sure it must be long after six o'clock."

But Ricky did not seem at all concerned with the passing of time. Donna heard sounds coming from the kitchen, but Mrs. West still did not call them for dinner.

"Whew," thought Donna as the hour grew later. "I'll bet I've never waited this long to eat dinner. My family must be all through by now, and we haven't even started. I'm so hungry I can't pay attention to what Ricky is saying.

I know she invited me for dinner, but I just don't think it's very nice to let your guests get so hungry. I wonder if anything's wrong."

But Ricky continued to chatter gaily. When Donna had begun to think that she would not have the strength to walk to the dining room, Mrs. West came to the bedroom door.

"Having a good time, girls?" she asked. "You sounded as though you were enjoying yourselves so much, I hated to disturb you. But I'm afraid dinner won't wait any longer."

"Ow," Donna groaned inwardly. "If she only knew how I felt, she would have called us hours ago."

The dinner was delicious, and by the time Donna had finished the last morsel of Mrs. West's homemade apple pie, she had forgotten that she had ever been hungry.

"It was a delicious meal, Mrs. West," said Donna. "And I know I ought to stay and help you with the dishes. But it's after nine o'clock, and I think I'd better get home."

"My, my," boomed Mr. West, as he took a large watch from his vest pocket and examined it carefully. "Why, it is after nine o'clock, at that. Fredericka, my dear, you must take your guest home. Much as we enjoyed having you,

Donna, I can understand your wanting to return to the bosom of your family."

"Mr. West is very nice," thought Donna, as she shook hands and said good-by, "but he's so different from my father. I could never have fun with him, and he talks in such a funny way."

"I wish you wouldn't make Ricky walk home with me, Mr. West," she protested. "It really isn't a bit necessary. I'm sure I'll get home all right by myself."

"Nonsense, nonsense, my dear. Think nothing of it."

Mrs. West walked to the door with Donna. "We were very glad you came, Donna. Now, Fredericka, take good care of your guest."

Donna thought she saw Mrs. West wink, but decided she must have been mistaken.

"It's really a shame to make you walk home with me, Rick. I wouldn't have minded going alone."

"It's a lovely night, Donna," Ricky said, looking up at the stars and taking a deep breath. "I like to walk at night."

"Well, just walk me to the door then," said Donna. "I'm sure Mother and Daddy will be waiting for me."

But to Donna's surprise, when they reached the house it was almost completely dark. Only the tiny yellow night

light burned in the entrance hall.

"Goodness!" Donna thought, alarmed. "Has everyone gone to bed already? Or is something wrong?"

She tried the front door, and found it locked.

"Oh, Ricky," she said in a small voice. "Something's happened. I know it has!"

CHAPTER 10 *A Party*

"Why don't you ring the doorbell?" asked Ricky patiently.

"Of course," said Donna, bestirring herself, and putting her finger on the bell.

There was a loud ring. The girls waited.

"Try again," suggested Ricky.

Just then Mrs. Parker appeared in the hallway. "Gee," said Donna. "Mother's wearing her new navy silk dress. She must have just come home from some place and been on her way to bed."

Mrs. Parker opened the door. "Hello, girls. Come right in," she said.

"No, Mother," said Donna. "I promised the Wests that Ricky would go straight home."

"Oh, that's all right," said Ricky unexpectedly. "I'd be

glad to come in. I'm sure Mother and Daddy won't mind."

Donna looked at her friend, then at her mother. Everyone seemed to be doing and saying such strange things lately.

"Go right in to the living room, Donna," called Mrs. Parker. "I'll take Ricky's coat."

Donna walked toward the darkened living room. She felt for the light switch.

The ceiling light flicked on. Suddenly the room seemed filled with girls, on the sofa, on the chairs, even on the floor.

"Surprise!" everyone shouted.

"Oh, my goodness!" said Donna, under her breath. She stood absolutely still at the doorway to the living room. Then she shook her head.

"It couldn't be! It's impossible! I'm just dreaming!" she murmured, over and over.

Everyone was quiet, watching her, but each girl wore a wide grin.

"Were you really surprised?" called Anne Franklin, from the sofa.

Donna was too stunned to answer.

"Didn't you suspect anything?" asked another girl.

"Here, we'd better get a place for Donna to sit," laughed Karen. "She looks as though she's going to fall right over on her face."

Donna slowly lowered herself into a chair. Slowly she looked around her. There were Mary Jefferson, and all the girls on the newspaper staff, and the girls who had been talking to Ricky that day in the front hall. Why, there must be more than twenty girls here!

Then everyone began to talk at once.

"We thought you'd suspect, when you saw that the house was all dark," said one.

"We tried so hard not to giggle. We were sure you'd hear us," said another.

"Mother and I felt awfully silly, keeping dinner so long," explained Ricky. "But we promised your mother we wouldn't get you back until after nine o'clock."

"You mean you knew about this, too, Ricky?" Donna asked. "I can't believe it."

"Of course I did. And don't think the girls didn't feel funny when you found us in the hall last week. I was telling them about the party—your mother had asked me to invite them—and then you came along and almost spoiled everything. We were sure you suspected something then."

Donna gulped. Yes, she had suspected something, but certainly not this. Imagine her thinking that the girls didn't like her any more.

"I'm—I'm just speechless," she said at last. A warm feeling flooded through her, starting in her toes.

"I love every one of you," she whispered. "It's the nicest thing that's ever happened to me."

Mrs. Parker stood in the doorway, smiling. Donna turned toward her. Then she ran over, and flung her arms around her mother. "Oh, Mother," she whispered. "It's the best birthday I've ever had."

Mrs. Parker kissed her daughter's cheek and smoothed her hair.

"I think the girls have some games planned, dear," she said. "I'll be upstairs with Daddy until it's time to serve."

"Oh, my," thought Donna. "That's why Mother didn't want me home after school. She was getting ready for the party."

Everyone enjoyed the games, although Donna was still too stunned to take much part in them. Most of the time she merely sat and looked around her with a smile on her face.

"Mother really fixed everything," she kept thinking. "She

gave me a wonderful party, and I feel so much better knowing that the girls still like me. And best of all, Ricky and I are friends again. Goodness, I've never had so much excitement in one day."

Just then the doorbell buzzed loudly.

"Oh," groaned one girl. "Is that somebody's father already, to take her home? Why, the party's hardly begun."

"I'll answer it," said Ricky.

In a second she was back, and came over to Donna. "It's a strange man," she said to Donna, in a low voice. "I know he's nobody's father. Maybe you'd better come."

"Perhaps I should call Mother," thought Donna, as she went toward the hall. "Strange men shouldn't go ringing people's doorbells so late at night."

She glanced at the figure standing on the porch, as she started toward the stairs.

"Why, it's Uncle Roger!" she said in surprise. "It's all right, Ricky, we can let him in. It's the uncle I was telling you about."

She opened the door, and her uncle, laden with a suitcase, bags, and boxes, stepped in.

"Good evening, Donna," he said. "What's going on? I hope I'm not intruding."

"Oh, no, Uncle Roger. Some of the girls came over, that's all. I'll run upstairs and tell Mother you're back. Did you have a nice trip?"

But Mr. and Mrs. Parker, hearing voices in the hall, were already on their way downstairs.

Mr. Norcross went to greet his sister.

"You'll have to put those packages down somewhere first," laughed Mrs. Parker. "What in the world do you have there?"

"Oh!" Mr. Norcross turned to Donna. "Well, one of the things is for this little lady. Did I understand that a birthday was coming along soon?"

Donna blushed. "Today, Uncle Roger. That's why the girls are here. Mother gave me a surprise party."

She took the large white box, tied with silver ribbon, which her uncle held out to her.

"Why don't you open it now?" Mr. Norcross asked. "I don't know much about sizes and things, but the salesgirl was pretty sure this would fit. Otherwise, you can return it."

Donna quickly took off the lid, and found folds and folds of soft white tissue paper. She lifted the paper carefully.

"Oh, Mother!" she breathed. Daintily she took out a white organdy dress.

"Oh, Roger, you shouldn't have done it," protested Mrs. Parker.

Ricky sighed. "It's a real formal."

Donna nodded. "And look at the skirt. There must be yards and yards of material. And aren't those tiny little rosebuds scattered on the skirt just as sweet as they can be?"

"Well, Donna," said her mother. "You're all ready for your first ball, thanks to your uncle."

"Oh, it's the most beautiful dress I've ever seen," said Donna. "And I'm sure it will fit perfectly. Thank you so very, very much, Uncle Roger."

Mr. Norcross turned to his sister. "Well, Grace," he said, "since this is the birthday girl's day, I suppose the rest of the gifts should wait."

"Gracious," said Mrs. Parker. "I hope you weren't as lavish with all your gifts, Roger."

Mr. Norcross smiled. "Just little remembrances for each of you. I can't resist the stores in New York. I even bought myself a present."

He unstrapped a package which he was carrying over his shoulder. "It's one of the most beautiful cameras I've ever seen. And I got it at quite a bargain, too. Did you ever see a lens like this?"

Mr. Parker laughed. "Roger, you've got to remember that we have no scientific background to appreciate things like an expensive camera. If you say it's good, we'll take your word for it."

"Then I've got to show you," said Mr. Norcross. "I have all the supplies for developing pictures in that box over there. Do you mind if I use your basement as a dark room?"

"Not at all," answered Mrs. Parker. "What would you like to take pictures of?"

"Goodness," said Donna suddenly. "The girls won't know what's happened to me. I'd better get back to the party."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," suggested Mr. Norcross. "How would the girls like pictures of themselves as souvenirs? It would only take me a few minutes to snap the pictures and develop them."

"Oh, they'd love it, Uncle Roger," said Donna. "Can you take everyone's picture?"

When the girls were told what was to happen, they scurried for combs and mirrors. True to his word, after setting up three very bright lights, Mr. Norcross snapped the pictures in a few minutes.

As he left the room, Mrs. Parker called, "Time to eat,

girls! Will you please come into the dining room?"

With much chattering and giggling, the girls trooped into the dining room.

"Oh, how lovely," they all sighed, as they gazed at the table decorations.

"Mother, you must have worked for hours making these things," said Donna. "Everything is just beautiful."

"If you're pleased, it was worth the work involved," said Mrs. Parker. "We only have one daughter, and she only has a birthday once a year."

The girls were just finishing the ice cream and birthday cake, when Mr. Norcross came into the dining room. He held a large board, with pictures laid on it.

"They're still a little damp," he said. "But I thought you'd like to see them."

The girls crowded around him. There were "oohs" and "aahs" as they admired their portraits.

Mr. Parker looked over the heads of several girls. "You're right, Roger," he said. "That's a wonderful camera. But, of course, you're also a very fine photographer. That helps, too, you know."

Mr. Norcross pooh-poohed the idea. "If the girls can wait a few minutes, I'll show you a trick I learned from a man

out in Hollywood. Will you be leaving soon?"

"We'll wait, we'll wait," chorused the girls, as they reseated themselves at the table.

"Here's a song I learned at camp," said Anne Franklin. "If any of you know it, join right in."

One song led to another, and before they realized it, Mr. Norcross was back again.

The girls rushed over to see what was on the board.

"Oh, my gracious me!" cried Karen. "This time my head's on backwards."

"And look at that one!" screeched Mary Jefferson. "There's tall Anne Franklin's head on little Karen's body. Doesn't that look silly?"

The girls giggled and tittered at the queer things Mr. Norcross had done with their photographs.

"May we take these home, too?" asked one of the girls.

Mr. Norcross nodded. "If you'd like," he said, obviously pleased with the delight the girls had shown.

"How did you make them?" asked Ricky.

"Just a little trick," explained Donna's uncle. "After I had developed the regular pictures, I cut them apart and pasted them together like this."

One of the girls rubbed a finger over her picture. "Gee,

I can't even tell where you pasted them, Mr. Norcross."

"Oh, no," the man laughed. "That's not the end. Then I tacked those pictures on a board, and took pictures of the *pictures.*"

"That sounds awfully complicated," said Donna, "but I guess I know what you mean."

"Here," said her uncle, fishing in a coat pocket. "This is one of the pictures that I pasted together."

"Oh, now I understand!" exclaimed Donna. "Then you tacked this cut-up picture on a board. I can even see the pin holes in the corners."

"That's right, Donna," Mr. Norcross agreed. "I had to stand it up straight. That's what you always have to do when you take pictures of pictures."

The girls were satisfied with the explanation. "It was lots of fun," they said to Donna, as they prepared to leave.

The fathers arrived to take their daughters home, and as the girls said good-by, Donna thanked each of them for coming.

"And you most of all, Ricky," she said to her friend, who was the last to go. "You helped to make this one of the happiest days I've ever had."

"And you, too, Mommy," Donna said, when she went

to kiss her mother good night. "And do you know, I'm glad Uncle Roger came home tonight. The picture thing he did for us was a lot of fun."

As she climbed into bed she thought, "Uncle Roger is an amazing person. He knows so much about so many things. That business about trick shots was very interesting. I might even be able to use it some day."

Donna had no idea how very soon she would put to use the information she had gained that evening.

CHAPTER 11 *After School*

"Well, that's one red-letter day I can cross off," said Donna the next morning, as she stood before the kitchen calendar.

"You've got a red circle around today, too, dear, haven't you?" asked Mrs. Parker, stacking pots and pans neatly in the cupboard.

"Gee, I'd almost forgotten that today is the day I promised to visit Joyce at the hospital. And it's such a beautiful Saturday, too. I wish I didn't have to go."

"Why, Donna Parker!" said her mother, turning around and putting her hands on her hips. "Weren't you the girl who was complaining because the other boys and girls didn't want to go with you?"

Donna studied her fingernails. "I know I ought to go, Mother. But after all the fun last night, it will be such a

letdown to go to a quiet, old hospital."

"Then just think of Joyce," reminded Mrs. Parker. "She's been in a hospital all this time, and she still has a long time to go."

Donna thought of what her mother had said when she entered the Summerfield Memorial Hospital at two o'clock that afternoon. The odors of alcohol, ether, and disinfectant mingled to give it a typical hospital smell.

"Ugh," thought Donna, screwing up her nose. "Imagine having to smell that all day. Poor Joyce!"

She tiptoed down the long hall toward the elevators. Several nurses passed by, making no sound in their rubber-soled shoes. They smiled brightly, and nodded a greeting.

"Goodness," thought Donna. "How can they look so cheerful, with people suffering all around them?"

The elevator stopped at the third floor. "Children's floor," announced the elevator attendant.

Donna noticed the gay pictures of prancing animals around the walls. At the far end of the corridor was a large room, and before it stood a desk.

"I'd better ask one of the nurses at the desk where to find Joyce," she thought. "All her mother said was that she was on the third floor."

"Right over in that corner," answered one of the nurses in response to her question. Donna walked quickly past the beds, trying not to look at bandaged heads and flushed faces.

"You'd never think so many children were sick," she thought sadly. "I feel so sorry for them."

Joyce's bed was just as she had imagined it, when Miss Fischer had told her that the girl was in traction. There were several sets of ropes suspended from the ceiling above her, and her leg was raised in the air. Near the bottom of the bed hung several large weights.

Joyce was lying with her face toward the wall. "I wonder whether she's asleep," Donna thought. "I would hate to wake her."

"Hello, Joyce," she called softly.

There was a quick movement, and Joyce turned around. "Oh, hello, Donna," she said. "My mother had mentioned that you might drop in." She spoke coldly, as though Donna's comings and goings were of little interest to her.

"Well, I must say she doesn't seem overjoyed to see me," Donna thought.

"May I sit down?" she asked aloud.

"Help yourself," Joyce said, pointing to the place where several small chairs stood.

Donna carried one over to the bed and sat down next to Joyce. Joyce merely watched her with half-closed eyes.

"What do I say now?" Donna wondered. She cleared her throat.

"How do you feel, Joyce?" she asked, hoping she was not saying something that would upset the girl.

"Pretty good," Joyce shrugged. "Of course I'm not really sick. These are mostly surgical cases— dislocated hips and appendectomies and tonsillectomies." She waved her arm in the direction of the other beds.

"Oh, dear," thought Donna in dismay. "I guess she means they had their tonsils out, and appendix operations. If she's going to lie there and make me feel uncomfortable, I'm sorry I came."

Then she remembered her mother's words that morning. "Your leg must have bothered you, though," she said. "I'll bet it's no fun to have all those weights hanging on your leg."

Joyce seemed to show a little interest. "Oh, there were a lot more weights at the beginning. The doctors have been taking them off gradually. I don't even mind what's there now. When all the weights can be taken off, they'll put the cast on and I'll go home."

"I hope it's soon," said Donna. "Even if I felt all right, it would worry me to see so many sick people around me."

Joyce nodded. "My mother and father were dreadfully upset at first, when the doctors put me in this room with all the children. But they said it was better than putting me with a grownup who might be very very sick. Most of the children get better quickly. And there's so much I can do for them."

"There is?" asked Donna in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Well, as soon as they're well enough to walk around a little, they come over to my bed, and I read to them. I play games with them, too. Sometimes a nurse will even bring a baby over here in its high chair, and let me try to feed it. You know, there are some awfully sweet children here."

Donna listened with interest. "The hospital really does seem to be doing Joyce some good," she thought. "It's the first time I've ever seen her show so much concern about other people."

Soon conversation between the two girls seemed much easier. Donna told Joyce of the latest developments in the campaign.

"Everyone was so happy when Sally Graham and George Hart got the nominations," she said.

Joyce nodded. "I sort of expected them to get it. They're the type who always win elections." Donna did not know whether she was envious or mocking.

"I'm awfully sorry you've been missing all the excitement, Joyce. Their speeches were wonderful. And the school is just plastered with signs like USE YOUR HEAD—VOTE FOR HART."

"But the main thing is the way the newspaper has been covering the election, Donna," Joyce reminded her. "Have you been stressing the importance of voting?"

Donna dug into her shoulder bag. "I didn't know whether you'd seen the last issue of the paper, so I brought it along." She handed a folded sheet of paper to the girl in bed.

Joyce quickly scanned the front page. Then she turned to the editorial page. Donna was quiet while Joyce read.

"Did you write this?" Joyce asked, pointing to the first column on the page. Donna nodded. She wondered what faults Joyce would have to find with the editorial.

"It's not bad," said Joyce, much to Donna's surprise.

"You know," Joyce went on, "I have a lot of time to

think while I lie here in bed. I've been reading the articles on the Summerfield election that have been running in my father's paper. I suppose you've been following the campaign, too."

Donna shook her head. "No, I don't think I have, Joyce. I've been so busy with school work and things—" she apologized.

"That's exactly what I mean!" said Joyce forcefully. "Even you don't follow a city election. There are a few people in Summerfield who care enough about what kind of person becomes mayor to go out and vote. The rest sit home, and complain after he's elected. Do you know what I've been thinking?"

Without waiting for an answer, she continued. "If the school election is successful, perhaps we could do the same thing in the city election, and—"

Donna interrupted. "Who is 'we' and what do you mean by 'the same thing,' Joyce? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"But it's simple," said Joyce impatiently. "The student body of Summerfield Junior High could stimulate interest among the adult population of Summerfield, in order to facilitate a large vote."

"Wow!" thought Donna. "She really rolled out the words that time. I don't even know whether or not I can translate them."

"You mean the students at the junior high could do things to get the grownups interested in voting so that more people will vote?" she asked hesitantly.

"Exactly," Joyce nodded.

Donna gaped. "But—but, Joyce," she stuttered, "that's not our affair. We don't know a thing about politics."

"Who should be better able to help in an election than a group of people who have already conducted a successful campaign of their own?" Joyce asked. "That is," she added, "if our campaign *is* successful."

"I guess you're right," Donna admitted. "I know my father keeps saying that he wishes something could be done to get people interested in their own city, at least. Wouldn't it be wonderful," she said, beginning to get carried along by the idea, "if we were the people who would do it?"

"Then you will present the idea to the school," Joyce said, leaving little room for Donna to change her mind.

"I—I guess so. But really, you know, Joyce, all I can do is present it. I can't make them do anything if they don't want to. They may be so sick of elections by the time ours

is over, that they'll never want to hear the word again."

"Of course," answered Joyce. She shook hands warmly with Donna, as her visitor prepared to leave. "Perhaps you can come back again," she said shyly. Then she added hastily, "Just to tell me about the school election, I mean. Then we can decide whether or not to go into city politics."

Donna looked at the girl lying on the bed. "Why, she's really lonely," she thought. "I'll bet nobody else from school has ever come to see her. And she's getting to be much nicer than she used to be. I guess there's some good in everything, even in having accidents and being in the hospital."

"Well, we won't have long to wait," she said aloud, slinging her pocketbook over her shoulder. "They're having a big pep rally on Monday after school, and we have to get the voting booths and everything set up for the voting on Tuesday. I'll call your mother and give her the results. And as soon as you come home, I'll come to see you."

"That'll be fine." Joyce smiled.

As Donna walked back toward the hall, her thoughts turned again toward the election. Until she had spoken to Joyce, it had seemed hard to believe that the time was drawing so close. It had seemed that they would go on working forever and ever, and that the election would never come.

But now it was almost here. How would she ever get everything done on Monday?

But Monday passed somehow. Donna was given permission to cut several classes. She spent her lunch hour interviewing the two candidates. Jack Kingston was to cover the pep rally, and Karen was interviewing a boy and a girl from each class to get their reactions to the campaign.

Donna raced up and down the stairs. Everyone on the staff was working at top speed.

"Goodness," Donna sighed at three o'clock. "I don't think I'll have the strength to walk to the auditorium, let alone do any cheering."

Miss Fischer walked into the newspaper office. "How are things going, Donna? Everything ready for the big day tomorrow?"

Donna pushed a lock of hair off her forehead. She consulted the list she had been carrying around with her all day.

"Just about everything, Miss Fischer. Do you think it would be all right if Tommy and I didn't go to the rally? The boys from the shop want me to tell them where to set up the voting booths, and Tommy said he would help."

"I'm sure everyone will understand," Miss Fischer said. "Donna, you certainly have been working hard on this. For

your sake, I hope it's a success."

"Thank you," said Donna gravely. "I know I'll be glad when it's over, even though it has been lots of fun. Well, I'd better get down to the shop now, so the boys can begin work."

She met Tommy outside the shop room, and handed him a chart she had drawn. "If you can supervise the boys setting up these booths—" she pointed to several places on the chart—"then I'll watch the ones over here. We can meet upstairs in the newspaper office when we're all through."

Donna watched while the two boys carried planks of wood, nails, and hammers to the far end of the first floor. The first booth her team was to build was near the auditorium, and she could hear the shouts of the boys and girls at the rally.

Cries of "Graham is great" and "Ahead with Hart" mingled with blows of the hammers. The booth was nearly completed when the rally ended, and hordes of boys and girls streamed out of the auditorium. They chanted, "Vote, vote, vote, vote, everyone vote to-*mor*-row!" as though it were a song. Far into the distance, as they started homeward, Donna could hear, "Vote, vote, vote, vote."

"Gosh," she thought, "after all that, I don't see how anyone could forget to vote."

"How does this look?" one of the boys asked, as he drove the last nail into a board.

"That's fine," said Donna approvingly. "Just let me see whether the curtains close." She pulled the dark green drapes, made by the girls in the sewing class, across the front of the booth.

"Absolutely perfect," she stated. "No one will be able to see how anyone else votes. But we still have another booth to build. Can you boys stay that late?"

"Sure thing," said one of them. "Now that we've put one up, it'll take us much less time to assemble the other one."

The boys were right. It did take much less time than the first. Nevertheless, the school seemed deserted by the time they had finished. She thanked the boys and started up the steps toward the fourth floor.

"It was foolish to promise to meet Tommy upstairs," she thought. "It would have been much more sensible to tell him to meet me down here. I had no idea that a building could seem so empty."

To her relief, Tommy was waiting for her in the office,

and Miss Fischer was with him.

"We'd better hurry," the teacher advised. "The lights will be turned off at any minute. I'd better take my flashlight along, anyhow."

As they reached the second floor the lights went off, and they were left in complete darkness.

"Oh, dear," sighed the teacher turning on her flashlight, "now we'll have to go out through the basement. The janitor locks all the doors and then turns off the lights."

She led them downstairs, and through a narrow passageway, the light beam from her flashlight bouncing along the walls ahead of them.

"I've never even seen this part of the building," Donna said. "It's a good thing you're with us, Miss Fischer."

Suddenly she stopped and grabbed Tommy's arm. "What's that?" she asked, pointing to a flickering light ahead.

"Oh, that," laughed Miss Fischer. "It's only the light from the boilers. We have to go through the boiler room, Donna, to a little door near the janitor's office."

"Gosh, it looks scary," said Donna, still holding Tommy's arm. As they came closer, she could see weird shadows flickering on the wall.

"Ooh, I don't like this a bit," she shivered. "I'll be glad to get out of here."

The passageway suddenly opened into a large room. They walked across what seemed to be a narrow bridge. Down below, Donna could see the huge boilers which supplied heat for the entire school building.

"Who—who's that?" she asked, in a low, shaky voice, pointing to a figure crouching in a corner of the room.

"Where?" asked Miss Fischer, turning toward them. "Why, there is someone down there."

The figure straightened up. "Oh," Donna sighed, "it's just Mr. Brown, the janitor."

"That's right," agreed Tommy. "He's only sorting papers from the big burlap bag he uses to empty the wastebaskets."

Quickly, the three hurried on, and soon reached the door.

When they stepped outside, Donna breathed a sigh of relief. "Whew! I was scared for a minute. Wasn't that silly, when it was only Mr. Brown?"

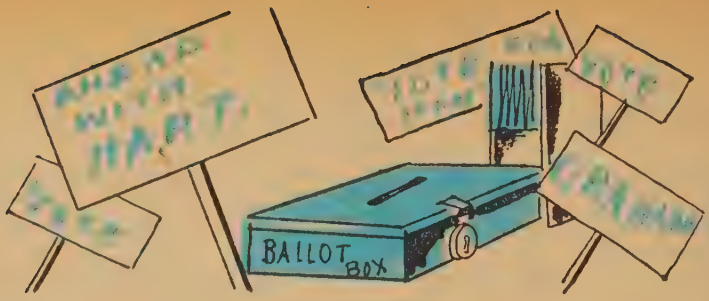
She looked at Miss Fischer, and was surprised to see that her brow was wrinkled in thought.

"Perhaps I misunderstood," the teacher said. "But aren't all waste papers to be burned immediately?"

Donna and Tommy looked at each other. "That's right,"

they said. "Mr. Greer insists on that," Tommy added.

"I wonder why Mr. Brown was going through the papers, then," mused Miss Fischer. "He must have a very important reason, if he's willing to break one of Mr. Greer's rules in order to look for something."



CHAPTER 12 *The Election*

"I wonder whether we ought to report what we saw to Mr. Greer," thought Donna the next morning, on her way to school. "There must be something strange going on, and yet, I'd feel like a tattletale."

But Donna had no time to think about what she should do, for from the moment she entered the school building, she was caught in the round of activity of election day.

"Say, the booths look like real ones," was a comment she heard a number of times during the day. The time spent after school the day before seemed well worth it.

Various classes were allowed to vote during their study periods, so that the lines would not be too long at the end of the day.

"Do you have any idea what the results of the voting are so far?" Donna asked Anne Franklin, who sat near a

booth with a large book before her.

Anne shook her head. "Not the faintest idea, Donna. The vote is absolutely secret, and no one's talking. All I do is check off the names of the people as they come here."

"Do you think everyone will vote?" Donna asked, looking at the marks Anne had made beside each name.

"Very nearly," Anne answered. "Just look at the people who have voted already. And honestly, after all the talk we've had about the importance of every vote, it would be a shame if just a few people spoiled it."

Donna watched with interest as the lines at the voting booths lengthened at the end of the school day. "I'll bet we make one hundred percent," Jack assured her as he stepped out of a booth. "There aren't many names left in this book, anyhow."

"And Tommy just looked at the book on the second floor," said Karen, who had overheard Jack's remark. "He says only about a dozen people still have to vote up there."

"Isn't it funny?" remarked Bill Blanchard. "This is the first election I've ever seen where people are more interested in the number of votes than in who wins."

The other boys and girls nodded. "I never thought of it that way," said Donna, "but it's true. We know that either

George Hart or Sally Graham would make a good mayor, although of course some people like one better than the other. But the important thing is that everyone should vote."

"Hey!" yelled Tommy, racing toward them and waving wildly.

"Sh!" cautioned Donna. "You know how angry Mr. Greer gets when we yell in the halls. What's the matter, Tommy?"

"One of the girls just told me," he panted, "that two boys in her room said the lines at the booth were too long, and they didn't feel like waiting. They simply walked off and went home."

"Without voting?" gasped Karen.

"I'll get them," offered Jack. "Which way did they go?" He and Tommy ran off down the hall.

"I wonder if anyone else did that," said Donna.

"Let's check and see," said Karen. "Maybe we can get them back, too."

At half-past four, when the booths closed, a great many people, including Mr. Greer and some of the teachers, waited to see how many people had not bothered to vote.

Donna and a few of her friends went from one booth to another. In a few minutes they were back at the front

VOTE HERE
AHEAD WITH HART

entrance, breathless with excitement.

"Everyone voted!" they cried.

"Every single person in Summerfield Junior High School cast a vote!" Donna repeated to make sure it was clearly understood.

A great shout went up. "We did it! We did it!" was the cry.

Mr. Greer came over to Donna and shook her hand. "A fine job, little lady," he said. "A record of which to be proud!"

Donna blushed. "But we still don't know who won the election, Mr. Greer," she added as an afterthought. "The ballot boxes are just being opened now."

It took only half an hour for all the votes to be counted. One of the boys stood before a blackboard and wrote the number of votes as they were announced.

"It's awfully close," Donna murmured. Then as the last votes were tallied, the boy announced, "The winner of the election is—George Hart!"

"Hurrah!" cried the crowd. People clapped each other on the back, shook hands, and danced around. George made a speech of acceptance, and Sally immediately countered with a speech offering him her full cooperation.

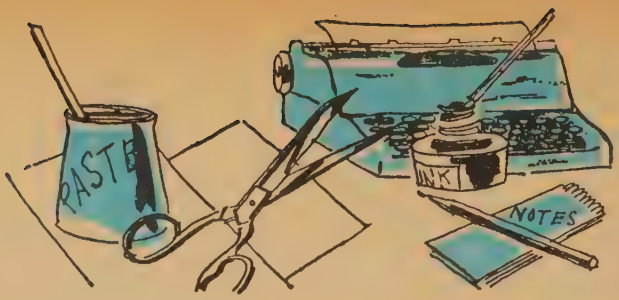
Everyone was thrilled. Donna was amazed at the number of people who came up and congratulated her. "But really, I didn't do anything," she kept saying, "It was just that everyone pitched in and helped."

"I guess if Joyce were here," she said to herself, "she'd start immediately in getting them interested in the city election. But I'd like a little while to enjoy today, and I'm sure they would, too."

Even dinner that night was a festive occasion. In honor of the event, Donna was excused from helping with the dishes, in order to answer the telephone which rang constantly.

"You might think I'd won the election myself," she thought, listening to the congratulations pour in. But she couldn't help swelling a little with pride.

She lay awake for a long time that night in the dark. "It's a wonderful feeling to have something turn out just right," she thought. "I wonder whether it will ever happen to me again."



CHAPTER 13 *Name in the Paper*

"If we only didn't have cooking class today," thought Donna. "It seems a shame to spoil such a wonderful day. But I must admit it was very nice of Miss Merwood to send doughnuts and cocoa to the people who worked after school," she added thoughtfully. "I must remember to thank her."

Miss Merwood acknowledged Donna's thanks briefly. "Glad to see women taking an active part in politics," she said. "One of women's chief responsibilities. But most important," and she wagged a warning finger at Donna, "is still running a house efficiently. Which brings us to the lesson for today."

She turned to the rest of the class, which was already seated, and clapped her hands sharply.

"Lesson for today," she announced. "Baking cakes. A

lost art. Cake mixes. Ugh!" she shuddered.

"I don't know why she feels that way about cake mixes," Donna whispered. "My mother always uses them, and I can't tell them from the other kind."

"This is one lesson I studied awfully hard," Karen whispered back. "She won't catch me on this."

"You have something to say?" Miss Merwood asked, the color rising in her face. "Very well, Miss Karen, you may tell us the four steps in cake baking."

Karen gulped, and turned pale. "The f-four s-steps?" she repeated blankly. "Well, first you mix the batter—" she began.

Miss Merwood interrupted. "Wrong!" She turned to Donna. "The four steps in cake baking?"

Donna looked at her friend, whose chin was quivering. "Well, in the first part the cake begins to rise—" She looked at Miss Merwood to see whether she was on the right track, but the teacher's face was blank. "And then it begins to brown, and then it finishes browning," she added triumphantly.

"I believe I said *four* steps, not three," snapped Miss Merwood. "Next week you will all *write* the four steps in cake baking. Kindly study!"

A small groan escaped from the lips of some of the girls. Miss Merwood paid no attention, but went on to assign tasks for the morning.

Much later, Donna pushed her hair back with a floury hand. The entire front of her apron, too, was covered with flour. "I thought I'd never get finished sifting that stuff," she muttered, lifting a bowl off the table, which looked as though a snowstorm had hit it.

"I'm sure I still have some eggshells left in this mess, too," whispered Karen, picking up her bowl which contained beaten eggs and milk. "Do you think this will look like any cake you've ever seen?"

Apparently Miss Merwood had the same doubts as Karen. When the finished cakes were taken out of the oven, she stormed up and down between the tables.

"This one," she said, pointing to a cake which had humps and hollows, "looks like the surface of the moon. And this," pointing to another which tilted precariously, "is probably meant to be the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Disgraceful, disgraceful! Simply shows no attention paid. We'll try again next week. There's the bell. You will have to come back after school and clean up."

"Wow! What a morning!" the girls murmured, as they

left the cooking class. But Donna found that, even though her cake was as bad as any of the others, she was not completely discouraged.

"Yesterday's election was a wonderful experience," she thought, "and nothing can bother me today, even staying after school."

Miss Merwood was not in the domestic science room when the girls came back. They cleaned up quickly, and put the key to the room in her box in the office.

"You don't seem disturbed by any of this," commented Karen to Donna.

Donna nodded. "I'm so happy about yesterday, nothing can disturb me."

When she reached home, whistling gaily, Jimmy came galloping down the front steps toward her.

"Hey, Sis, you're late," he bellowed. "Didja see the newspaper?" He held out a copy of the afternoon paper.

Donna took the paper, and grimaced at her brother. "*Must* you make so much noise?" she asked. "What is it that I'm supposed to see?"

"This," he answered impatiently, pointing to a headline on the first page.

"Ooh," squealed Donna, folding the paper in half. "It's

about the school election. Isn't that wonderful?"

"And there's more, too," he stated proudly. "Look on the ed-ed—"

"Editorial page?" his sister prompted. Jimmy nodded, and she turned the pages quickly. " 'Junior High Election Should Shame Adults'," she read. " 'Every adult citizen of voting age should pay particular attention to the results of yesterday's mock election at the Summerfield Junior High School. Under the guidance of Miss Donna Parker—' " she broke off and ran into the house.

"Mother, Mother, my name's in the paper," she cried. "Did you see?"

Mrs. Parker came into the hall. "Isn't it grand, dear? Yes, I showed it to Jimmy. And won't Daddy be proud of you, too!"

Indeed, Mr. Parker glowed when he saw the articles. "So that conversation with your Uncle Roger about elections really did some good. Fine, fine!" He strutted up and down the living room.

"It was nice of Frank Davenport to have these write-ups on the election," he said suddenly. "We must call and thank him." He turned to his wife. "Grace, how about inviting Mr. and Mrs. Davenport to dinner one night? I'd like to

talk this over with him. If the children can have a one hundred percent vote, we really should be ashamed. Maybe they can show us how to do it."

"You know, Daddy," said Donna, "that's exactly what Joyce suggested. At first I thought it was silly, but perhaps she's right."

Mr. Parker picked up the phone. The conversation was short.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Parker, as he hung up. "What did he say?"

"He said he thought it was an excellent idea. They'll try to make it on Friday night."

"Daddy—" Donna went over to her father and picked at his lapel. "Could I ask a favor of you?"

"You mean you want to be allowed to stay up that night?" He smiled down at his daughter. "I think that can be arranged, eh, Grace?"

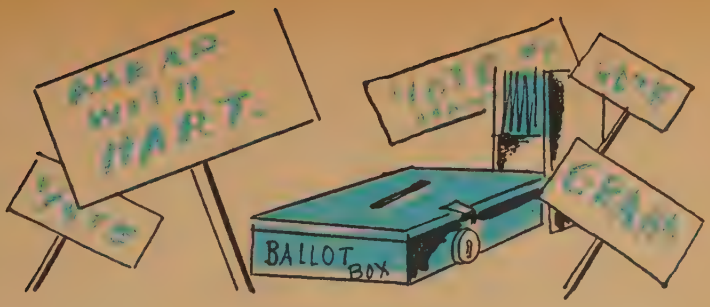
Donna shook her head. "That would be very nice, but it's not what I wanted to ask. You've heard me talk of Miss Fischer, the newspaper adviser. She worked so hard during the campaign, that I'd like to ask her to dinner that night, too. She's awfully nice, and I'm sure you'd like her. Besides, she's new in town, and she must be lonely. Could she come,

please? I'd *so* love to have her!"

"That's a fine idea, Donna," said Mr. Parker. "I'm sure Mr. Davenport would enjoy talking to her about the campaign."

"Oh, thank you, Daddy. Thank you, Mommy." She hugged both parents.

When she went to bed, she counted the nights until Friday. "I'll be having dinner with a newspaper editor and a teacher! Golly!"



CHAPTER 14 *Guests for Dinner*

"Miss Fischer, may I talk to you for a minute?" Donna asked the next day, when she saw the teacher standing at the door of her room.

"My class is coming in now, Donna," said Miss Fischer sweetly. "Could it wait until after school? You can meet me here, or in the newspaper office. I have a little work to do before I leave this afternoon."

"Of course," Donna agreed. "Oh, dear," she thought, as she walked off. "I wonder what I should say when I ask her."

She practiced several beginnings. "I'll just say whatever comes into my head," she thought finally.

But a little while later, when she met Karen in the hall, her worry over the invitation was quickly forgotten.

"Did you hear the latest?" Karen asked, in an annoyed

tone. "Miss Merwood wants all the girls who were in the cooking class yesterday morning to report to her after school today."

"Again?" asked Donna. "We went back and cleaned up everything yesterday. What's the matter now?"

"Oh," said Karen with a sigh, "she probably found a speck of flour or something."

"I'd understand her wanting to see us if she tried eating any of that cake," said Donna. "It probably tasted as though it had plaster of Paris in it instead of baking powder."

"If she had eaten any of that cake," answered Karen wryly, "she wouldn't even be here today. She'd be in the Summerfield Memorial Hospital with a stomach pump."

"Well, I guess we have to find out what the trouble is, anyhow," sighed Donna. "And I was supposed to see Miss Fischer after school. She won't know what happened to me."

A few seconds after the final school bell, the girls filed quietly into the domestic science room and took their accustomed places. Miss Merwood's face was fiery red, and her hair was even more disheveled than usual.

She tapped nervously on a table, waiting for everyone to settle down. There were a few moments of silence.

"Well!" the teacher finally exploded. "Whose fault was it?"

The girls looked at one another. What did Miss Merwood mean?

"Come, come! Take the blame. Who is guilty?"

The girls stared. What was she talking about?

Donna timidly raised her hand.

"You! Donna! Never would have thought it."

"I don't mean I did anything," said Donna hesitantly. "I'm afraid we don't know what you're talking about."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" replied Miss Merwood, rapping sharply on the table. "Who was here after school yesterday?"

Everyone raised her hand.

"Who," continued Miss Merwood, "entered the apartment?"

The girls looked at each other in astonishment. They knew that next to the cooking room was an apartment, which included a large living room, a small dining room, and a real kitchen. This was used to teach the girls how to entertain, how to serve guests, and for many other things. But, except for the day they had been shown the apartment, none of them had been in it.

"Quickly, please. No time to waste on foolishness. Someone was in that apartment after I left. You were the only ones who had the key."

The girls shook their heads.

"Bad enough to go in without permission, but such disorder! Dreadful! Might at least have put drinking glasses away. Water tap not turned off tightly. Chairs moved out of place. Think I don't notice those things?"

The girls cast glances at each other as though to say, "Old Eagle-Eye! She notices everything."

Miss Merwood waited. The girls sat quietly. The clock on the wall ticked on.

"Shame! Certainly thought the culprit would own up. Can't keep you any longer, getting no place. Shall watch everyone *very* carefully—every move. Don't like girls who won't admit wrong-doing. Excused!"

The girls filed out as silently as they had come in. "Gosh, is she going to be any stricter than before?" asked one of the girls. "I can't imagine anything any worse than it is already."

"But none of us were near her old apartment," wailed Karen. "I don't know what she wants us to say. Should we admit something we didn't do?"

Cook
1. Milk for
B. Stew h
C.

"I must say things look pretty bad for us, Karen," said Donna. "It's true we were the last ones in there, and the keys were in the office after that."

Her head was bowed as she walked out the front door, trying to think of some solution to the mystery of the apartment.

Suddenly Donna raised her head. "Why, Miss Fischer," she said in surprise. "I almost bumped into you."

She went on to explain the reason for not being able to keep her appointment. "I guess you wondered what had happened to me," she apologized.

"I knew there was a good reason, Donna," Miss Fischer said. "Perhaps you can tell me now what it was you wanted to say to me."

Donna told her about Mr. and Mrs. Davenport coming to dinner to discuss the election.

"And we'd like you to come, too," she ended. "It is on Friday night. If you'd like, my mother will call and invite you."

Miss Fischer smiled at her. "That won't be at all necessary, Donna. And tell your mother and father that I'd love to come."

Donna counted the minutes until Friday night.

"Is it time to set the table now?" she asked her mother as soon as she entered the house on Friday afternoon.

"Goodness," laughed Mrs. Parker. "I think we ought to invite Miss Fischer more often. You usually have to be coaxed to set the table."

"And can we use the silver candlesticks, Mother?" Donna begged.

"Don't you think they're awfully fancy for a simple little dinner?" asked Mrs. Parker. She saw her daughter's face fall, and added hastily, "All right, all right, but be sure to polish them first."

"Can we serve the juice and crackers in the living room?" Donna asked a little later, leaning anxiously over her mother's shoulder.

"My, you make me nervous, Donna," said Mrs. Parker. "Here, finish spreading the cream cheese on these crackers."

"Mother—" Donna cocked her head to one side, and held the knife in the air.

"For goodness sake, what now?" asked Mrs. Parker. "Would you like a butler to serve? Donna, dear, we're plain people, and I'm sure Miss Fischer doesn't expect anything elegant. Now just relax."

"But it's about Jimmy, Mother," said Donna. "Does he

have to be here? He's always so noisy and he spills things, and he takes such big bites."

"Now, Donna," warned Mrs. Parker. "He is your brother, and he's like all other boys his age."

Donna sighed.

"But you may be interested in knowing," continued Mrs. Parker with a smile, "that Jimmy has been asked to have dinner and spend the night with the Grays." Skipper Gray was Jimmy's best friend.

"Oh, Mother. That worked out beautifully," Donna said in relief. "I'm so glad." She closed the package of cream cheese, and put it in the refrigerator. "I'd better comb my hair. They'll probably be here at any minute."

Mrs. Parker watched her daughter dash out of the kitchen, and shook her head. "Girls have their problems, too, I guess," she said half aloud.

Despite Donna's fears, the dinner went off smoothly.

"They've talked about newspapers, and politics, and New York City, and Los Angeles," she thought, as she looked from one face to another. "I wonder when they're going to begin discussing the city election."

It was not until after the table had been cleared, and coffee and dessert served, that the subject was raised.

"Perhaps Donna should tell us what happened in the school election," suggested Mr. Davenport.

Donna blushed, and shook her head. "I'd rather have Miss Fischer tell you. She knows all about it."

But Donna was amazed to hear how much Miss Fischer did know. "Wow," she thought, "did we do all those things? I didn't realize it, but when she tells it everything seems so well planned."

When the teacher had finished, Mr. Davenport and Mr. Parker explained to her how the city election was held. She nodded thoughtfully several times.

"Now Uncle Roger will tell how he thinks things ought to be done," thought Donna. "He has ideas about everything."

But to her surprise, Mr. Norcross offered no suggestions. "I'd like to hear what Miss Fischer thinks we should do," he said, looking squarely at the teacher.

The discussion lasted so long that Donna's back began to ache. "How can they sit here and just talk for so long?" she thought. The conversation lulled her, and she tried desperately to keep her eyes wide open.

Suddenly a hearty laugh from Mr. Davenport aroused her. "It seems that we're putting our guest of honor to

sleep," he said. "I had no idea it was so late."

The Davenports and Miss Fischer arose. Donna accompanied them to the front door, and, together with her parents and her uncle, shook hands with them.

"Your father will tell you all the plans we've made for you young folks," Mr. Davenport said to Donna as he left. "In case you happened to miss anything tonight." He winked at her. "You know, my daughter will never let me forget it if the city election turnout is not as good as the school election was."

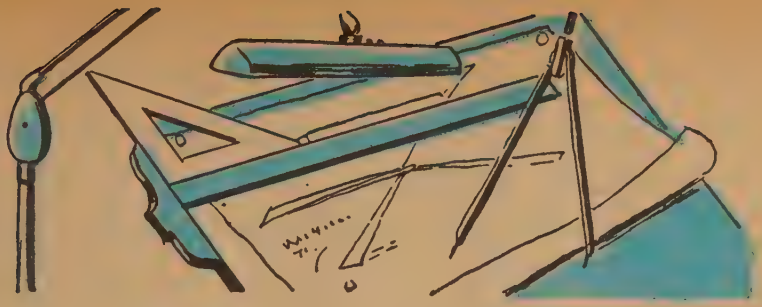
"That reminds me," thought Donna sleepily, "I promised Joyce to talk to the people at school about getting to work in city politics. I'd better not forget it."

As she started up the steps, thinking how grown-up she had felt during the evening, she heard her mother at the bottom of the stairs.

"Gracious, Roger," Mrs. Parker was saying. "You were awfully quiet tonight. Was something wrong?"

Donna waited to hear her uncle's answer. "Not a thing," he answered cheerfully.

"But Mother is right," Donna thought, as she tumbled into bed. "He *was* awfully quiet. He hardly said a word all evening. Wonder what he was thinking."



CHAPTER 15 *Tommy's Plans*

"So you're now entertaining teachers at your house," said Ricky the next morning. "That's one way to get good marks."

Donna looked at her friend sharply to see whether or not she was teasing. It was an Indian summer Saturday, and Ricky had called right after breakfast to see if the two girls could spend the morning together.

Donna had been delighted. "Oh, Mother," she had said after Ricky's phone call, "it will seem like old times. I think Ricky has felt much friendlier toward me ever since my surprise party."

Now she was slightly puzzled. Maybe Ricky *was* only teasing. But, on the other hand, perhaps she really did feel that Donna was currying favor this way, that she was trying to "get in good" with Miss Fischer. It wasn't like

Ricky to make such a remark, and fun or no fun, it hurt.

Donna decided to treat it lightly. "Since my marks are so terrible anyhow, I decided this was the only way to improve them," she said. Ricky knew that she always did very well in English.

Now it was Ricky's turn to be hurt. "Aw, come on, Donna. You know I didn't mean it that way. Anyhow, what did you talk about all night? I'm usually bored to tears by an evening with my mother's friends."

"I'd better not tell her I practically fell asleep," thought Donna. "She'll think I'm a baby."

Aloud she said, "Oh, it was very interesting. We discussed all sorts of things." She put an airy emphasis on the "we."

"But most of the time we talked about the city election next month," she continued. "Mr. Davenport and my father, and even Miss Fischer, think the junior high school students could do a lot to help bring out more votes."

"I wish I could do something," said Ricky seriously. "You all seemed to have such a good time getting ready for the school election."

Donna was surprised. Did Ricky sometimes feel left out of things, too?

"Our first problem," Donna told her, "is to find a way to get the people at school interested in the city election. Can you think of any way for us to do that?"

Ricky chewed on her knuckles. "George Hart is the mayor. Maybe he could arrange an assembly program, and have different speakers and things."

Donna snapped her fingers. "You've got it, Rick! Suppose we had different people—grownups, I mean—tell about how important the election is? And then one of the students could make a speech suggesting things we could do to help, and getting everyone's interest. If we got good speakers, I'll bet we could make it sound very exciting."

Ricky nodded. "Do you know anyone who would do it?"

"Well," said Donna slowly, "I'm sure Mr. Davenport and my father could suggest some names for the adults. But which student do you think would make the best speech?"

The two girls stared off into space. Then Donna uttered a short cry and grabbed Ricky by the arm.

"Ow," squealed Ricky, "what's the matter now?"

"The speech," said Donna, "—you!"

"What do you mean, me?" asked Ricky in bewildered tones as she drew back to look at her friend.

"Don't you see?" Donna asked. "You put so much feeling into a speech, and you like to talk in front of an audience, and you've been practicing in dramatics club. I'm sure you could make a wonderful speech in the assembly."

Ricky turned pale. "Oh, Donna, I couldn't!" Then she hesitated. "But wouldn't it be wonderful? I'd stand in front of them like a Roman orator, making a speech to the whole Senate. I'd begin very calmly. Like, 'Friends, Romans, countrymen—' "

Donna giggled. "Oh, Ricky, you're a scream. You couldn't say that."

"Of course not," Ricky said impatiently. "I just gave that as an example. Anyhow, I'd begin very softly, and then I'd work up to pounding on the table—" her voice rose and deepened— "and at the end the applause would be deafening—" her voice fell to a whisper— "but I'd simply bow and sit down."

Donna clapped loudly. "There! I knew you could do it. Now all we have to do is figure out what you're to say."

"Maybe we'd better ask your father first, and George Hart," cautioned Ricky. "Let's not go too fast. We can ask them on Monday."

"Why waste the time?" countered Donna. "We can

ask my father for suggestions right now, and call Mr. Davenport, too. And George Hart knows about the assembly programs, so we can call him, too. Let's get started right away."

The calls were made in short order. "George was so interested he said he'd come over right away," Donna reported. "And Mr. Davenport and Daddy said they thought it was a wonderful idea. How did you ever think of it?"

"Me?" asked Ricky. "Why, I thought *you* thought of it."

True to his word, George arrived in a few minutes. He listened to the plan that the girls presented. He, too, seemed much impressed.

"It'll probably take several days to invite outsiders to speak," he said. "It seems a shame to wait. And I know that there are a few minutes that can be spared at the Monday morning assembly. Could you girls have Ricky's speech ready by then? I'm sure I can get Mr. Greer's permission."

"You mean *this* Monday?" squealed Ricky.

"We can do it, Rick," said Donna solemnly. "And George is right—it would be a shame to wait, with the election so close."

"I'll see Mr. Greer about it, then," George promised, as he left the house.

The two girls spent most of the day writing speeches and tearing them up.

"How does this sound?" Donna asked, late in the afternoon. She began to read.

"Here, let me," said Ricky. "You've got to get more fire in it!"

Donna listened, nodding her head approvingly. "That's it, Rick," she said at the end. "If that doesn't get everyone excited, I miss my guess."

Apparently the girls had guessed correctly, for at the close of assembly Monday morning, the applause was as deafening as Ricky had dreamed it would be.

To Donna's surprise, George had arranged for two cheerleaders to come up on the platform. "Let's give a locomotive V-O-T-E!" called one of the boys, as he bent down and held out his hands.

The students began softly "v-o-t-e," then louder "V-O-T-E," then even louder and faster *"V-O-T-E,"* so that they sounded like a locomotive putting on steam. Then, "Vote, vote, vote!" they cried, as the cheerleaders leaped into the air.

"That did it!" George congratulated the girls after the assembly. "Now we'll have to appoint committee chair-

AHEAD
WITH
HART

men, and really get to work on this thing."

By the end of the week, Donna was able to report to her father that things were well under way.

"We have one committee that does nothing but ring people's doorbells to tell them about the election," she explained at dinner one night, "and another committee is made up of girls who have volunteered to be baby sitters on election day, so the mothers can go to vote. The people who are good in art are making posters to put in all the store windows downtown. It seems that everyone is doing something."

A little doubt popped into her head. "But I haven't seen Tommy Sheridan around much. And he did so much in the school election. I wonder whether anything's wrong."

The next day she sought him out. "How do you like the way everyone's working on the election, Tommy?" she asked. "Wouldn't it be simply terrific if we had a one hundred percent vote in this election, too?"

Tommy nodded. "I guess you've wondered what's happened to me, Donna. I've been working awfully hard on those new helicopter plans. It seems that every time I get one problem solved, I get into something else."

"What's the matter, Tommy?" Donna asked. "You

sound worried. Are you getting discouraged because you haven't finished the plans yet?"

"More than that, Donna. This may sound silly, but I'm absolutely convinced now that someone has been looking at my drawings when I'm not around. Just the other day, I noticed that the corners of the papers were bent."

"Could I see them?" asked Donna. "I don't know what good that will do, but maybe I'll think of something."

"Sure," said Tommy. "If you don't mind walking up to the mechanical-drawing room."

Donna waited while Tommy lifted the top of his desk. Underneath, carefully rolled and held by a rubber band, were the blue papers she remembered seeing before.

"Gee, you've done a lot of work on them, Tommy," she said, as he unrolled the papers.

She looked at both sides of the drawings, then sighed. "I don't know what I thought I'd find," she said. "You wouldn't expect whoever has been tampering with them to sign his name."

Then she stifled a cry. "Look, Tommy!" She pointed to a corner of the paper. "Do you tack these to a drawing board when you work on them?"

Tommy shook his head. "Never. Why do you ask?"

"Look at these little holes in the corner. And they're in the other three corners, too."

Tommy looked at her blankly. "Well, I didn't put them there. What does it mean?"

"It means," announced Donna, "that someone has tacked them up on something. And the only reason I know for doing that, as my Uncle Roger told me, is so that they can be photographed. Somebody wants a copy of these plans!"

CHAPTER 16 *Mr. Brown Again*

Donna and Tommy walked slowly up the steps to the newspaper office, their thoughts racing. So Tommy had been right! Someone really was interested in those plans. But why? And what should they do about it?

"I guess I'd better tell my father," said Tommy suddenly. "I'd like to get his advice about what to do."

"Goodness," said Miss Fischer, as they entered the office, "the two of you look as though something dreadful has happened. But never mind, I have some news that I'm sure will cheer you up."

She held out to them a printed leaflet, at the top of which appeared the words, SCHOLASTIC PRESS CONVENTION.

"What does 'Scholastic Press' mean?" Donna asked, pointing to the boldly lettered heading.

"Do you recall the little emblem that appears at the top of the *Sum-It-Up* on each issue?" Miss Fischer asked.

Donna and Tommy nodded. "But I never paid much attention to it," Donna confessed.

"It means that this newspaper, and many, many other school newspapers all over the country belong to a special group. There is a junior high division, a senior high division, and even a college division. Every year the groups hold a convention, a very large meeting which lasts for several days. At the end of the convention, prizes are awarded to the best newspapers for various things they have done. It's quite an honor to receive a prize in the competition."

"Oh!" said Donna. "Well, now I understand that part of it. I guess this leaflet—" she pointed to the paper Miss Fischer had given her— "tells when the convention is going to be held, and all about it."

"Why don't you read it?" suggested Miss Fischer. "The convention is going to be in New York, during December. I thought perhaps a group of boys and girls on the newspaper staff would like to attend."

"You mean we'd go to New York?" asked Tommy. "Wow-ee!"

"Alone?" asked Donna. "Without our parents?"

Miss Fischer smiled. "But you would have other adults along. I would go to keep an eye on the girls, and perhaps a man teacher who isn't too busy would stay with the boys."

"Would we go separately?" Tommy asked, his face falling. "That wouldn't be much fun."

"No," said Miss Fischer, "we'd all go together. But I think it would be wiser to have both a man and a woman along."

"Well, we'd have to talk it over with the other staff members," said Donna. "And we'd have to get permission from our parents, too. How soon do we have to know, Miss Fischer?"

"As soon as possible, Donna. I'd have to arrange for hotel reservations, and train schedules, and tickets for meetings."

"I'll bet it would be a lot of fun," said Tommy. "I've never been to New York, even though it only takes about two hours to get there by train."

"Let's see whether we can find any of the other people, and hear what they have to say about it," suggested Donna, when Miss Fischer had left.

"Here come Mary and Karen," said Tommy. "And I know where I can find Jack and Bill and some of the others. I'll be back in a minute."

Soon almost the entire staff was gathered in the room. "Read it for yourselves," said Donna, after she had told them a little about the convention. They all crowded around the leaflet.

"Ooh, wouldn't it be wonderful?" sighed Karen. "Staying in a real hotel, and eating in restaurants all the time."

"And I'd ride in a taxicab every place we went," said Jack. "The kind that has glass on top, so you can see the sky."

"Not me," countered Bill Blanchard. "I want to ride on a Fifth Avenue bus, and in a subway."

"And I want to see all the beautiful stores," said Mary. "Just imagine spending a whole day going in and out of dress stores and hat stores and shoe stores."

"Hey!" Tommy interrupted. "I thought this was supposed to be a newspaper convention. So far I haven't heard anyone mention meetings, or things like that. They may take up a little of the time."

Donna giggled. "Of course we'd go to meetings, silly. But there'd be the evenings, anyhow. Maybe we'd even see some famous people. They always come to New York. Anyhow, it's nice to think about."

Everyone agreed about that.

"Let's go home and tell our mothers and fathers," said Donna. "We'll see how many of us can go. Miss Fischer wants to know as soon as possible, so she can make all the arrangements."

The group broke up, and the staff members meandered toward the hall door.

"—and maybe my mother would buy me a new dress," Donna heard Karen say. "She's been promising me a pale blue taffeta."

"Oh, my," thought Donna. "People are beginning to pack already, and they don't even know whether they can go."

"Ow!" said Mary, ducking as the door flew open, almost bumping into her. Mr. Brown trudged in, carrying his burlap bag with him.

"Watch where you're going!" he mumbled under his breath. In a little louder tone he added, "You kids in here again? Always in here, snoopin' into other people's business."

The girls turned to stare. What had gotten into the janitor?

He picked up the large green waste basket and dumped its contents into his bag.

"Always hangin' around here," he continued to mutter. "Makin' work for people. Why don't you kids go home when everybody else does?"

"Now listen here," Jack began, taking a step toward the man.

Donna caught his arm. "Let him talk," she whispered. "He's just an old crab anyhow."

But everyone continued to stare as the man picked up several papers that had dropped on the floor, examined them, and threw them into the bag.

"Elections, elections!" he said, his voice beginning to rise. "That's not what this country needs anyhow. Too many people tryin' to run this government as it is. Get one strong man, and he'll *tell* the people what to do. No more takin' orders from a bunch of fools. Hah!"

He stalked out of the room. There was complete silence in the office.

"Well!" said Karen. "What got into him?"

"Yeah," said Bill. "What'd we ever do to him?"

"Oh, there must be something wrong with him," explained Tommy. "He acts a little queer all the time."

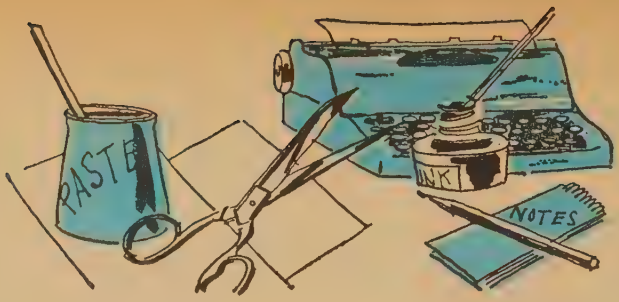
"But did you hear the dreadful things he was saying?" asked Donna, still shocked. "He could practically get put

in jail for saying things like that, I'll bet."

"Oh, come on," said Mary. "It's not worth the time worrying about somebody like him. I'd much rather talk about New York."

New York! The words were magic. All thought of Mr. Brown was forgotten during the walk home. The name of the big city cast a spell, and they could talk of nothing else.

Yet, as Donna said good-by, and walked up the front steps, she thought, "A man like Mr. Brown is not only queer. He could be very dangerous!"



CHAPTER 17 *Interruptions*

The telephone rang shrilly as Donna laid her books on the hall table.

"I'll get it, Mother," she called.

She spoke briefly on the phone, and put the receiver back on the hook.

"Who was it?" asked Mrs. Parker, who had come downstairs.

"Mrs. Davenport," answered Donna. "Joyce is home from the hospital now, and she wondered whether I could come over and visit her."

"Poor child!" clucked Mrs. Parker. "She must be awfully lonely. Why don't you go over right now, dear?"

"I guess I ought to, Mother. We got along a lot better when she was in the hospital. She seems much more gentle now, somehow."

"I know," Mrs. Parker agreed. "Sometimes a few hard knocks do us a lot of good. Well, I'm sure your visit will mean a great deal to Joyce. Run along, but don't be late getting back for dinner, dear."

Donna ran a comb through her hair, dashed into the kitchen for a glass of milk and a cooky, and flew down the front steps.

"Gosh," she thought, on her way to Joyce's house, "I didn't even get a chance to talk to Mother about Mr. Brown or the convention or anything. I'll have to remember when I get home."

Joyce did indeed seem glad to see Donna. She showed Donna the plaster cast which covered her legs from waist to knees.

"It must be awful to have to be in that thing," Donna thought. But to her surprise, Joyce seemed quite cheerful.

"It feels so good to be home again," Joyce said. "You can't imagine how wonderful it is to sleep until eight o'clock in the morning."

"Is that late?" asked Donna, remembering the Saturdays she had stayed in bed until half-past nine.

"In the hospital they woke us every morning at *five* o'clock," said Joyce with feeling. "You had to get washed

and brush your teeth at that hour. Then the nurses would disappear until half-past seven. And just as you were beginning to go to sleep again, they'd serve breakfast." She made a face.

"Well," said Donna, "for more than one reason, I'm glad I've never been in a hospital!"

"But tell me about you," suggested Joyce. "What's been happening at school?"

"She really has changed," Donna thought. "Before this, Joyce was only interested in herself, and whether people knew how smart she is. But now she's asking about me!"

She told Joyce about the assembly program which had launched the election. "Everyone went out simply cheering, and so excited about joining committees that we had no trouble getting workers."

Joyce seemed delighted. "I knew you could do it, Donna. Have you been writing about the election in the school paper?"

Donna nodded. "I think I have the last issue in my pocket somewhere." She dug into her coat pockets. "Of course the articles aren't very good. It's such a shame you aren't there to write them."

Joyce quickly read the items which Donna pointed out

to her. "Why, they're very good," she said. "You've written exactly the right things. I'm sure I couldn't have done any better."

Donna opened her mouth, then closed it again. "Well," she thought again, "has she changed!"

"Talking about the newspaper," she said to the girl in bed, "have you heard about the convention in New York?"

Joyce listened intently while Donna told her about it. "I wish I could go, too," she said a little wistfully. "But I'm sure the cast won't be off by then. Anyhow," and she brightened, "wouldn't it be wonderful if our paper won a prize? What are you going to send to the contest, Donna?"

Donna looked blank. "Contest? Why, we haven't even thought of that part. We were so excited about going to New York that we forgot the reason for our going there. Do you have any suggestions, Joyce?"

"I think you ought to send in all the articles about the elections—the school election and the city election. One follows the other naturally, and together I think they make a wonderful story."

"I don't feel they'd win any prizes," Donna commented. "But let me talk to the others about it. Now I'd better run home, Joyce. It's almost dinnertime. But I'll see you in a

few days. And since you have a telephone by your bed, I can call you whenever there's any news."

"Oh, that would be wonderful," said Joyce gratefully. "Next time, maybe you can stay longer."

Donna walked home feeling she had done a good deed. "I must tell the other girls how much nicer Joyce is now," she thought. "It's a shame she doesn't have more visitors."

She was almost home when she saw a familiar figure coming toward her.

"Oh-oh," she thought, as the flushed face and flyaway gray hair of the woman assured her that she was right. "It's Miss Merwood! I hope she doesn't start a long conversation."

But when the two met, Miss Merwood stopped. "Donna, glad to see you. Feel just dreadful!"

"Why, Miss Merwood," exclaimed Donna, "is something wrong?" She could see that the cooking teacher appeared even more upset than usual.

"Must apologize," said Miss Merwood. "Not your fault at all."

"Goodness," thought Donna. "What's she talking about now?"

"Sorry to have blamed you girls. Couldn't have been you

this time. Must have been somebody else."

"This time?" Donna asked, puzzled. "You mean something else has happened?"

Miss Merwood nodded vigorously. "Blinds," she said. "Blinds," she repeated, seeing Donna's perplexed expression. "In the apartment. Window blinds."

"Oh, you mean something has happened to the blinds on the windows in the domestic science apartment? What's the trouble with them, Miss Merwood?"

"Crooked. Torn. Somebody opening and closing them. Tricky. Supposed to work them gently. Practically ruined now." Miss Merwood looked as though she were about to cry.

"But who could have done it?" asked Donna. "I don't understand."

"Can't imagine. Couldn't have been girls. Apartment locked, keys in office when I left school. Went back to see whether refrigerator was defrosting. Saw this. Shocking!"

Donna began to put things together. "You mean it happened after school? Could it—could it possibly have been the janitor? Maybe he was cleaning the blinds when they tore." *Or maybe he was there for another reason,* she thought. He seemed to be the only suspicious character

around the school. But what would he be doing with the blinds in the apartment? Even as she said it, she realized how ridiculous it sounded.

"No, no," said Miss Merwood with vigor. "Janitor never enters apartment. Doesn't have key. Not supposed to clean apartment. Classes take care of all that. Can't understand it."

Donna told Miss Merwood how sorry she was to hear what had happened, and hoped she would not worry too much about it.

"Not worry, humph!" snorted Miss Merwood. "Can't wait to find the culprit. Better watch out then!" She said good-by to Donna and marched on, her face redder than ever.

"I wouldn't like to be the guilty person, whoever he is," thought Donna. "Imagine having Miss Merwood on your trail!"

But her thoughts quickly turned from Miss Merwood's problem to her own. She simply must not forget to tell her parents about the newspaper convention in New York. Suppose they wouldn't let her go? Suppose they thought she was too young, or that the trip would be too expensive? She thought of a million reasons that might occur to her

parents, reasons that could rule out the trip.

And yet the first thing she saw when she entered the house made her completely forget about the convention.

A letter, addressed to "Miss Donna Parker" lay face up on the hall table next to her books.

"I wonder whether this was here when I came home after school," Donna thought, as she picked it up and examined the strange handwriting. "How could I ever have missed it?"

"Donna?" called her mother from the kitchen. "Is that you? Hurry and wash for dinner, dear. And, oh, yes, there's a letter that came for you this morning. I put it with your books so you wouldn't miss it."

"I have it, Mommy. I'm opening it now." She glanced down the page, and quickly turned it over to see the signature.

"Mother! Mother! It's from the count!" she cried, rushing into the kitchen and waving the letter at her mother.

"The who?" asked her mother in bewilderment.

"The count. The Count de la Tour Pointue. You remember. Ricky and I met him at camp last summer. We thought he was a poor old man, and he turned out to be a French count. Remember? He was living in that mysterious house

down the road, and I met him in the woods one day, and—"

"Yes, dear, I know," interrupted Mrs. Parker. "You told the story to so many people when you came home from camp that I think I could repeat it in my sleep. Why has he written to you?"

"Oh!" Donna stopped short. "I haven't even read the letter yet, I was so excited. Wait a minute."

There was silence for a moment. "Mother, listen to this." She read, " 'And in the near future perhaps you would make an old man again happy'—he didn't speak English very well, remember?—'and come to visit him in the large city. Your charming friend also, the Ricky with the red hair, perhaps she is able to come with you. I shall look forward to your response.' "

Donna sighed. "I guess I'll just have to go to New York now, with *two* invitations."

"Two?" Mrs. Parker looked startled. "Why, Donna, what do you mean?"

"Gee, Mommy, so much has happened today that every-time I start to tell you, something else comes along to make me forget." She told her mother about the newspaper convention.

"May I go, Mother? Please, please, please say Yes. It'll

be such fun. And I've never been to New York in my whole life."

"We'll have to talk it over with Daddy, dear. And I would suggest that you wait to ask Ricky." Her mother would say no more.

"I've just *got* to go," thought Donna. "I can attend the convention, and we can visit the count at the same time. It'll be the most exciting thing that ever happened to me. Oh, I do hope Daddy will say Yes!"

CHAPTER 18 *Disappointing Results*

"Of course it would be a very nice trip," Mr. Parker agreed when he heard about the convention, and the count's invitation. "And your mother and I must realize that you're beginning to grow up."

Donna nodded solemnly, but her eyes sparkled. "Then you mean I can go, Daddy? Oh, thank you, thank you. I'll call Ricky right away." She threw her arms around his neck.

"Not so fast, now," warned Mr. Parker. "You'll have to give us a chance to investigate this thing a little more carefully. Don't ask Ricky until we decide definitely. There's still a month before the trip."

"I wish they'd hurry and make up their minds," thought Donna sadly. "They'll probably take the whole month to decide. And I'll spend the time worrying so much, I'm sure

I won't be able to think of another thing."

But in that, Donna was wrong. Although she and her friends often talked about the convention, they had a great many other things to think of.

"For instance, the election," said Donna one day as she looked at the calendar in the newspaper office. "Goodness, Tommy, do you realize that the big day is only a week from now? I simply must write more articles for this week's *Sum-It-Up,* to remind everyone how important the election is."

"More articles?" asked Tommy. "Why, Donna, I don't see how anyone could work harder than they are now. I think half the girls in the school are going to be baby-sitters, so the women can vote. And the boys are going to telephone people to remind them about it, and run errands at the polls."

"Everyone's really being wonderful," Donna agreed. Her eyes twinkled. "Did you see that Ricky signed up to be a dog-walker?"

Tommy clapped his hand to his forehead. "You mean the great actress is actually going to spend the afternoon taking someone else's dog for a walk?"

Donna bristled. "Now listen here, Tommy. Ricky never

goes around putting on airs. And if walking a dog will get someone to vote, I think it's wonderful that she'll do it."

"Me, too," Tommy apologized. "Anyhow, that just shows how seriously everyone is taking the whole election."

As the day grew closer, excitement mounted.

"It reminds me of the school election," Karen said, as she and Donna watched the crowd around a bulletin board in the hall. "Only this is even better, because all of Summerfield is interested in this."

Donna nodded. "Have you seen the signs in the store windows downtown? That was George Hart's idea. He's really an awfully good mayor for the junior high school."

"He's certainly working hard enough on this," Karen agreed. "Every time I see him, he's giving out lists, or getting something organized."

"Well, it won't be much longer now," said Donna. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we really got every single person to vote?"

But that thought was doomed to disappointment the very first thing on election day.

"Why the sad look?" asked Donna when she met Jack Kingston going into the school building.

"That's one person off my list already," Jack frowned.

"Do you know Mrs. Langley? I called her just before I came to school, and she said she simply couldn't vote today."

"She couldn't?" repeated Donna indignantly. "I know she's got four children, but that's no excuse. We could get a baby-sitter for them."

Jack looked glum. "I'm afraid not. You see, the four children, and Mrs. Langley herself, all have the *measles!*"

Donna stopped short. Then she started to giggle. "Oh," she laughed, leaning weakly against a doorway. "I know it sounds cruel. But it struck me so funny. That's the best excuse I ever heard of for not voting. I hope no one else has the same reason."

No one else did, but Donna was sure she would never again hear so many strange stories in one day.

"Mrs. Hughes called to say she would vote if we get someone to baby-sit for her," Mary Jefferson reported, as she joined the crowd in the lunchroom.

"What's so unusual about that?" asked Tommy.

"Just that she doesn't have any babies," Mary retorted. "Her mother lives with her, and she's stone deaf and can't be left alone. So she wanted someone to baby-sit with her *mother!*"

"That's as bad as Mrs. Johnson," said Bill Blanchard.

"I just happened to be in the office when she called to say she couldn't leave the house because she was waiting for the plumber. Boy, was she surprised when Mr. Greer said he'd send someone over to watch for him, until she came back from the polls."

When the school day ended, everyone rushed off to his duties.

"I've never seen the school empty so quickly," Donna said, as she left the deserted building.

"Well, the polls are only open for a few more hours," Ricky reminded her. The two girls had found that Ricky's dog-walking and Donna's baby-sitting would take them in the same direction.

"By the way, do you have any idea how many people have voted so far?" continued Ricky.

Donna shook her head. "We'll pass the polls on our way, though. Maybe we can find out."

As they reached the old garage which was being used as a polling place, Tommy dashed out, waving a piece of paper.

"How's it going?" the girls called.

"Pretty good," he panted. "I've called everyone on my list already. These are the only people in this district who

haven't voted yet." He waved the paper in his hand. "And most of them are men who aren't home from work."

"Keep after them," Donna called, as Tommy ran off.

"That's only this district," she reminded Ricky. "We mustn't get too excited, because we have no idea what's happening in the rest of the town."

"Maybe they'll have the results on the radio tonight," suggested Ricky. "It's a shame Summerfield isn't big enough to have its own television station. That would be much more exciting."

"That's a good idea, though," said Donna. "Ask everyone you see to come over to my house about eight o'clock, and we can listen to the returns together."

Ricky nodded. "I'll walk Mrs. Shepherd's dear little old Great Dane, which is as big as I am, up and down the street. I'm sure some of the gang will pass this way, and I'll spread the news."

Donna walked up the front steps of a small red brick house and rang the bell.

"Hi, Mrs. Williams," she said when a young woman wearing a gay apron came to the door. "I'm Donna Parker, from Summerfield Junior High."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Williams gushed. "Come right in, dear.

I'll just whip off my apron, and be ready to leave in a minute. This is Timmy, who's four, and Ronnie, who's two. They're both very good little boys, and I'm sure you'll have no trouble."

Mrs. Williams dashed up the stairs, and Donna looked around her. Timmy had a can of oil paint, and was seated on the floor of the living room smearing it on a large piece of brown paper.

"I don't know whether there's more paint on the paper or on him," thought Donna.

She looked around for Ronnie, and found him sitting on top of the piano.

"Here, come down right away," Donna exclaimed as she dashed over to the little figure.

Timmy looked up from his painting. "Oh, he likes it up dere. He can come down aw wight," he said calmly.

"Goodness!" thought Donna. Mrs. Williams reappeared in the living room and flashed a brilliant smile at Donna.

"I know I won't have to worry about a thing," she said. "You look as though you know a lot about children. You won't mind if I stop and do a little shopping on my way home, will you, dear?"

Donna opened her mouth to speak, but Mrs. Williams

rushed on without even noticing.

"And when I get back, I think Mrs. Smith across the street would like you to come over, and then Mrs. Huggins next door." The woman had her hand on the front door knob but continued to rattle on. "It's so nice of the junior high to send you girls. We just never get a chance to get out. Do you know, I don't think I've ever voted before? It'll be very interesting, I'm sure. I mean, it'll be a real experience. My husband never thought it was very important for a woman to vote, but I said to him just the other night —" she broke off suddenly, and looked at her watch.

"Oh, dear, I'd better run. I promised to meet May Mackay at the polls. I was talking to her on the phone this morning, and I told her that the school was sending over a nice young girl so I could vote, and she said—"

In the middle of the sentence, Mrs. Williams closed the door, and Donna could hear her go down the stone steps outside.

"Good gracious," she thought. "I thought she'd never leave. And look at this place! Mother would practically die of shock if she saw a room look like this, with toys and books and everything all over the place. I wonder what's happening to the other girls."

Donna had a chance to find out in the evening, when a group of girls and boys gathered at her house to listen to the radio reports.

"I thought I'd never live through this afternoon," Donna sighed, while they were waiting to hear the news. "I've never seen two such little Indians in all my life. I was simply weak when I left that house, and then I had to go to two other people."

"Me, too," said Karen. "Mary and I met Ricky, and she told us everyone was coming over here. Otherwise I would have just crawled into bed, I was so exhausted."

"I made thirty-seven phone calls in one afternoon!" croaked Jack Kingston. "I can't even talk now."

"I'll bet none of you are as tired as I am," complained Ricky, who lay on her stomach on the living-room rug. "Did you ever try to pull a Great Dane one way when he was determined to go another? The only thing that mean old dog wanted to do was to lie on his back and have me tickle him. It was all I could do even to get him out of the house."

Everyone giggled. "Now that would make a wonderful title for a book," said Tommy. " 'Ricky West: Girl Dog-Tickler.' Can't you just see it?"

"Well, it was for a good cause," said Donna. "I'm just keeping my fingers crossed that all our work brought some results. Ssh—here's the news."

Everyone leaned forward, while the local announcer explained that the polls had closed a short time before and the votes were now being counted.

"I don't care who wins," said Ricky, who was now sprawled on her back. "What matters is how many people voted."

But although they learned that the voting had been heavy, it was not until much later that the announcer told them what they were waiting for.

"More votes were cast in this election," he said, "than in any previous election that Summerfield has ever had. Latest figures show that almost ninety percent of the eligible voters in our fair city came out to the polls."

Donna clicked the dial of the radio. There was silence in the Parker living room.

"Ninety percent!" repeated Tommy. "I guess that's pretty good," he said hesitantly.

"We had a hundred percent in our school election," said Karen. "We all worked so hard, I thought we'd do better than just ninety percent."

Donna tried to cheer them up. "It's the best we've ever had, though." No one seemed elated, however.

But the next morning, at a special assembly which had been called, they were surprised to hear what other people thought of the election.

The newly elected mayor, the defeated candidate, and Mr. Greer all made speeches. And each of them congratulated the entire student body for the splendid work they had done.

"It was worth all the work," Donna said later, "just to hear the nice things they said about us. I guess ninety percent wasn't so bad after all."

How very good it was, Donna did not learn until later.

"Look at the paper," her brother Jimmy called when she came home that afternoon. "Mr. Davenport wrote all about the junior high and how hard they worked, right on the front page."

"Oh, I must see Joyce right away," Donna said. "I'll bet she made her father do that."

But to Donna's surprise, Joyce said she had had nothing to do with it.

"Donna," Joyce said, "I do believe you have no idea what an excellent job you've all done. Why, it's practically im-

possible to get so many people to vote. They've never had such a big turnout for any election in the whole state!"

"Really?" said Donna, dazed. "I didn't know. Why, we were even disappointed that there weren't more."

Joyce laughed. "Donna, you've put Summerfield Junior High School on the map. My father told me that the wire services wanted the whole story of the election. Do you know what that means?"

Donna shook her head.

"It means that the story will be in practically every paper in the entire *country*. All over the entire United States people will be reading about our city, and our election, and our school. Why, you're a real celebrity."

"I can hardly believe it," Donna murmured. "Wait'll I tell everyone else. I guess we really ought to celebrate. Maybe Mother will let me invite some of the gang over, and we can have a sort of party."

The girl on the bed said nothing. Donna looked at her.

"Oh, Joyce, I wish you could come, too. After all, the whole thing was really your idea. If you hadn't suggested doing something about the city election, I never would have had the nerve to try it. It doesn't seem fair for you to be left out."

Joyce smiled, but Donna thought her eyes seemed a little moist. "Oh, that's all right," she said. "You did all the work, and it's only right that you should get the credit. Anyhow," she turned her face slightly toward the wall, and her voice lowered, "they wouldn't want me at the party. I'm not the kind of girl people invite to parties, I guess—or to anything else, for that matter. . . .

"Well," and Joyce tried to make her voice gay again, "I'm awfully glad you came to see me, Donna. Please come again soon."

Donna's feet dragged a little as she walked home. "It's just a shame," she thought. "Joyce has turned out to be really nice, but no one will give her a chance. I must find a way to show everyone how she's changed."

But what could she do? It was something to think about.

CHAPTER 19 *Off Again, On Again*

"And she really is much nicer now," Donna said for the tenth time.

Mrs. Parker had given permission for her daughter to invite a few friends over to celebrate the election. The rug had been rolled up, and the furniture pushed to one side of the room. Some boys and girls were dancing to the music of phonograph records, but a few were sitting on the floor near the fireplace with Donna.

"All right, all right," sighed Jack Kingston. "We believe you, Donna, honestly we do. Joyce just doesn't happen to be our type. We don't mind if you're friends with her, if you want to be."

"Anyhow," said Karen, jumping to her feet, "we didn't come here to discuss Joyce. The other night, after the election, was the time we should have celebrated. We didn't

have any idea that a ninety percent turnout was terrifically good. So let's enjoy ourselves now."

"That's right," agreed Tommy. "We can talk about Joyce in school on Monday. Boy, I can't wait till I see the other newspapers. Imagine people reading about us all over the country! It's a wonder my father didn't close the factory, he was so excited!"

Donna realized that she would spoil the party if she continued the subject, and resolved to say no more, but to see that everyone had a good time.

On Monday morning, however, at the newspaper staff meeting, the opportunity for which she had been waiting arose. The meeting began quietly enough.

"We simply must decide what to send to the competition," Donna announced. "The contest for junior high school newspapers closes next week. If we want to win any prizes, we'd better get our entries in immediately."

After much discussion, it was finally decided to send the editorials which told the entire story of the election.

"That is, if it meets with Miss Fischer's approval," added Donna. "And don't you think that we ought to tell the judges that the idea of working in the city election was Joyce Davenport's? After all, she's still editor of the paper."

"But you did the work, Donna," several people objected.

"I'm sure Joyce could have done a much better job if she had had the chance," said Donna. "And she's missed all the excitement, and all the fun. It seems the least we can do for her."

She finally convinced the other staff members that they should see things her way. "That's the first step in getting them to accept her," she thought. "And wouldn't it be wonderful if we really won a prize? I'll bet that would make Joyce happy, too."

"Now all we have to do is to get Miss Fischer's opinion," said Karen. "I wonder why she hasn't come this afternoon. She usually attends our meetings."

Miss Fischer entered the room just then, and everyone turned in her direction. What was the matter? Instead of her usual cheerful smile and gay greeting, the teacher wore a deep frown.

"Is something wrong?" asked Donna.

"I'm afraid I have some very disappointing news," replied Miss Fischer. "I've been putting off telling you about it, but I'm afraid we can't wait any longer."

"Oh, dear," thought Donna. "What now?"

"You know that all reservations for the convention must

be in by next week," Miss Fischer continued. "You may remember that I said that I would accompany the girls, and I would ask a man teacher to stay with the boys during the trip. I'm afraid I couldn't possibly handle such a large group by myself."

Everyone nodded, and waited for Miss Fischer to go on.

"To make a long story short—I won't go into all the problems—there simply is no man teacher who can go. So I'm afraid the trip is off."

There was a groan throughout the room.

"I even have my new blue taffeta," said Karen.

"I wanted to see the Empire State Building," said Jack.

"My parents hadn't given permission yet, but I was sure they would," Donna said. She had really been counting on going.

"I wish there were something I could do," said Miss Fischer, looking so helpless that everyone felt sorry for her.

"Maybe the girls could go with you, anyhow," suggested Tommy. "There's no reason for them to suffer, too."

"We wouldn't want to do that," replied Donna immediately. The other girls nodded in agreement. "We wouldn't have a good time, thinking of you boys staying at home."

"Maybe somebody's father could go," said Karen.

"Would that be all right, Miss Fischer?"

Miss Fischer's face brightened. "That's a good idea, Karen. Do any of you think your father could come to New York for a few days?"

Everyone looked at everyone else. Gradually their faces fell again.

"Nope," Tommy shook his head. "I guess our fathers are all too busy."

"We still have a few more days, Miss Fischer. Maybe we'll think of something," Donna consoled the teacher.

But that afternoon, talking things over with her mother as she helped peel potatoes, she still could see no way out.

"Well, I guess that's the end of New York," she sighed. "I guess I'll be a grandmother before I ever get there."

As she spoke, she noticed a shadow coming from behind her. Someone had entered the room. She whirled around, paring knife still in hand.

"Why, Uncle Roger!" she cried. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Here, put down that knife." Her uncle pretended to shrink from her. "Do I look like a dangerous character to you?" Then he turned to Donna's mother. "What's this about New York?" he asked, going over to the cooky jar

and helping himself to the contents. "Grace, do you mean to tell me that you and Sam aren't going to let this child visit the big city?"

Donna didn't know whether to be indignant that he had called her a child, or happy that he seemed concerned about her.

"No, Uncle Roger, that's not it." She proceeded to tell him about the convention, and Miss Fischer's troubles in getting a man teacher to accompany them.

"So that's why we can't go," she concluded, "and everyone is so disappointed, even Miss Fischer."

Mr. Norcross raised his eyebrows. "Is that so? Well, we'll have to do something about that. Now let me see—" He strolled over to the kitchen calendar and stood before it, rocking back and forth on his heels.

Donna held her breath. What did her uncle mean?

He turned toward her. "When did you say the convention will be held?"

She pointed to the dates on the calendar.

"Now isn't that a coincidence?" he said, in an amazed tone. "It seems to me that I'm going to have to be in New York just about that time. Do you think an uncle could take the place of a teacher?"

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Donna gaped. "You—you mean you'd go with us? Oh, Uncle Roger!" She sank into a chair, speechless with joy.

"That's an excellent idea," said Mrs. Parker. "I'm sure Mr. Greer would give his permission to have you accompany the group. But are you sure you can spare the time, Roger?"

Mr. Norcross looked at Donna, and it seemed to the girl that his eyes narrowed a little. It was as though there were thoughts going through his head about which he would rather remain silent.

Then he smiled gaily. "It would be a pleasure to escort so many charming young ladies—" he made a deep bow in Donna's direction—"and, of course, equally charming young gentlemen. Who am I to resist the call of a maiden in distress?"

Mrs. Parker patted her brother's arm. "Well, well, you certainly have changed, Roger. I can remember the days when you had no time for young ladies, even the charming ones. And since you haven't married, I thought you still felt the same way about them."

"Now, now, Grace," Mr. Norcross warned. "I know that look in your eye. Don't start marrying me off to the first single woman who comes along."

"Mother," Donna interrupted, "if Uncle Roger does come with us, then Daddy and you will give me permission to go to New York, won't you? You just can't say No now!"

"I guess we can't," Mrs. Parker chuckled. "You see the position you've put me in, don't you, Roger?"

"And may I call Ricky right now, and tell her about the invitation from the count?"

"But Ricky isn't on the newspaper staff, Donna. Will you be able to get permission to have her go with you?" asked Mrs. Parker.

"Oh, yes, Mommy. I explained the whole thing to Miss Fischer, and she said she was sure it would be all right. Of course, nothing was definite. I said I'd tell her when I knew more about it."

As she dialed Ricky's number, her thoughts raced. It was wonderful that Uncle Roger could go along. But what kind of business would take him to New York, and then let him spend several days with a group of junior high people? He had never really answered her mother's question about being able to spare the time.

No, he was just being nice about it. Think of the lovely presents he had brought them from New York. She was a silly girl even to think there was more to it than the fact

that he was a nice, thoughtful person.

She listened to the buzz on the telephone wire.

"Busy," she said aloud, putting down the receiver and waiting a few minutes before she could try the number again.

Her thoughts went back to her uncle. "I hope he isn't too bored on the trip," she thought. "But then, when Tommy was over here, the day that he arrived, they had a long conversation about helicopters. They can always talk about that."

She picked up the receiver again. Then suddenly she slammed it down. "Tommy!" she thought. "It all begins to make sense now."

Her uncle was the only person she knew who was interested in helicopters. Her uncle was an excellent photographer. And whoever wanted a copy of Tommy's plans merely had to photograph them.

"And there *were* pin marks in the corners of the drawings. I was right! So that's why he wants to go to New York with us—to be near Tommy. Oh, I must warn him."

Then she paused. "Uncle Roger! My mother's own brother! How horrible to have a spy right in your very own immediate family."

She put her head down on her knees. It was dreadful. She was sure she was right. She was also sure no one would believe her. Perhaps the trip to New York would give her the information she needed. All she could do was wait.

CHAPTER 20 *More Problems*

Waiting was hard. The days passed, and Donna marked each one off on the big kitchen calendar. Nothing seemed to matter much except the arrival of those December days that would mean the trip to New York.

Mr. Norcross came and went, still saying nothing about his business or his reason for being in Summerfield. Donna was sure it had something to do with being so close to New York, because at least once a week he would announce that he had to go there.

He would arrive home a day or two later, bearing some little trinket for each member of the family.

"Except for the trips, he's so very little like a spy, that I'm sure he must be one," Donna kept thinking. "He's always nice, and thoughtful, and interesting to talk to. You'd never in the world think he was the kind of person who would

give important secrets to the enemy. But I guess that just proves that I'm right. The kind of person who'd look like a spy is never the kind they'd pick. Well, I'll probably find out everything on the trip."

Tommy had been warned and had promised to report all conversations to Donna.

"But I still think you're wrong about him," he had said. "Men can always tell a good guy from a bad one. And I'll bet my bottom dollar that he's an all-right one."

Only Ricky shared Donna's feelings.

"It's so *exciting,*" Ricky whispered when Donna came over to her house one afternoon and told her about the situation. "It makes me tingle all the way down to my toes. Imagine! A spy right here, living in your very own house. Aren't you scared?"

Donna shrugged her shoulders. "He isn't spying on us, Ricky. Anyhow, you mustn't talk as though it's absolutely definite. We haven't proved anything yet. It will probably break my mother's heart if we find out that we're right."

"But of course she'll have to know," said Ricky. "We'll be very gentle."

"My only hope," Donna continued, "is that Uncle Roger isn't my real uncle at all, and that he's somebody else posing

as him." She hesitated. "But I do like him. And he has been awfully nice to us. I just can't make up my mind."

Ricky sighed. "Well, at least we're going to New York together. I can't wait to see the count again. And I'll be able to help you keep an eye on your uncle, too. If anything else happens, let me know *right away.*"

It was not until the end of the Thanksgiving week end that Donna had anything to report. The four days of the holiday had been spent quietly.

"In fact, it may never be this peaceful again," Donna thought. "By Christmas we may know the worst. We may never have a happy, peaceful time like this again, with the family all together."

"You've been so quiet, dear," her mother remarked the last evening of the holiday. "Is something bothering you? You're not upset about tomorrow morning, are you?"

"Tomorrow morning?" Donna looked at her mother blankly. "Tomorrow's Monday, Mommy, and the only thing that bothers me is cooking cl— Yeeks! I really did forget! Oh me, oh my!"

"Good heavens, why the scream?" asked Mr. Parker, coming into the living room with the newspaper tucked under his arm. "Somebody run a knife through you,

Donna? It certainly sounded like it!"

"Just as bad, Daddy," wailed his daughter. "I completely forgot that cooking class for this week was changed to Monday. Real big deal, you know. Our class has to prepare a whole breakfast in the school apartment, and serve it, too."

Mr. Parker raised his eyebrows. "What's so terrible about that? Your mother prepares breakfast three hundred and sixty-five days a year, and you don't hear her shrieking every time she thinks about it."

"This is different, Daddy," Donna explained patiently. "In Miss Merwood's class, nobody can even boil water the right way. It'll probably take us the whole day to get breakfast made. We even have to get there at half-past seven."

"Half-past *seven?*" Mr. Parker repeated. "It's hardly light then. You'll have to be up with the roosters to get there at that hour, my dear daughter."

"Huh!" snickered Jimmy. "And she's always the last one out of bed in the morning. Guess you'd better go to bed right this minute, Sis. Otherwise you'll never make it."

"Mother, make him stop teasing," said Donna, on the point of tears. It was bad enough to worry about her uncle and the trip. Now she would be awake all night worrying

about cooking class tomorrow morning.

Mr. Norcross looked up from the book he was reading. He was always reading something about audio-dynamics, and other things Donna could not understand and had never heard of.

"Seems to me I remember another young lady saying that about her brother," he said. He mimicked Donna's tone. " 'Mother, make Roger stop teasing.' Remember, Grace?"

Mrs. Parker blushed and nodded. "You always were a tease, though, Roger. I guess all small boys are alike. I'll never forget the time—"

Donna tucked her feet under her and propped her chin on her hands. When her mother began that way, she would go on for hours. And Donna loved to hear the stories of her mother's childhood.

"Roger, I have a wonderful idea." Mrs. Parker arose and went over to the desk which stood by the window. "Here's a book that's more interesting than that dry stuff you're always reading."

Donna clapped her hands. "Oh, Mother! The photograph album! We haven't looked at it for ages. It's such fun, Uncle Roger."

Mrs. Parker pulled out a large green book with black pages. She put it on the low table in front of the sofa, and everyone crowded around.

"There's Mommy when she was a little girl." Jimmy pointed to a picture. "Look at that funny haircut."

"Well, Uncle Roger had his hair cut that way, too," laughed Mrs. Parker. "And he looked a lot worse than I did."

"I'd never know that was Uncle Roger," commented Donna. She tried to keep her tone light, but she watched her uncle anxiously.

"It's not something I'd be proud of," said Uncle Roger, putting down a picture of a small boy in a sailor suit. "Now here's one I like much better. Do you remember this, Grace?"

He pointed to another picture, this time of a boy about Donna's age. His hair was slicked back, and he wore a heavy white sweater with a large letter *R* on it.

"I was so proud of that sweater. The next year at camp it was lost, and I'll never forget how awful I felt."

Donna listened to the stories. Uncle Roger seemed to remember some things that even her mother had forgotten. After a while Donna stopped listening and leaned back in

a corner of the comfortable big sofa.

"I'll have to tell Ricky about this tomorrow morning," she thought. "Uncle Roger is my real uncle. There's no doubt about it. No one else could know about all those pictures, and all the stories about the family."

She didn't know whether she was glad that the matter was decided, or not. "If only I'm wrong about the spy part," she thought. But the facts fitted together too neatly.

"I'll tell Ricky in the morning," she kept saying as she fell asleep.

It was not until late on Monday, however, that Donna remembered to tell Ricky what she had learned. Events of the morning were much too exciting.

As she dressed by the light of her bed-table lamp, she remembered her father's words the night before.

"I guess this is the earliest I've ever been up in the winter," she thought. "It really is still dark, just as Daddy said. I wonder if it'll be light by the time I get to school."

The sky was an overcast gray when Donna reached the steps of the junior high. Only a few lights shone in the building.

"I guess they leave those on all night," thought Donna. "Or maybe the janitor turned them on this morning. I'm

sure I'm the first person here today. I wonder when the other girls will get here."

The door was locked, and Donna pushed the night bell. She could hear the ring resound through the empty halls.

It was cold on the stone steps. Donna pulled her coat collar higher around her ears. The wind whistled around the corner of the building.

She waited a few minutes, but could hear nothing. "Maybe there's another door open," she thought. "Anyhow, I can probably use the little door by the boiler room. Even going through that dark hall will be better than waiting out here in the cold."

Sure enough, the little door was unlocked. "I hope I remember the way," she thought. It had been comforting to have Miss Fischer and Tommy along, the last time she used this entrance.

But she found that it all looked familiar, and, except for a pounding heart, she reached the door of the cooking room without mishap.

"Thank goodness I didn't come upon Mr. Brown in the passage," she thought. "That would have scared me to death."

Her hand was on the doorknob when she paused.

Through the pane of glass in the door she could see that the room was still dark.

"Oh, dear, this door is probably locked, too. I guess I'll just have to wait for Miss Merwood or somebody to come along with a key."

But what was this? She could turn the knob. The door opened with no trouble. Could Miss Merwood have forgotten to lock it the night before? No, this was Monday. The place couldn't have been left open during the whole Thanksgiving week end.

Donna felt a catch in her throat. "Pooh," she said bravely. "Probably she's already been here, and is just off some place. Just because I don't hear pans and things rattling doesn't mean there's anything wrong."

She entered the room and hung her coat on the rack. Suddenly she stopped. Why, there *were* pans rattling, in the apartment next door. Funny there weren't any lights in there, either. Well, she'd just go in and show Miss Merwood how early she had come.

She swung open the door to the apartment. "Good morning, Miss Merwood," she called in a cheerful voice. Then she stood stock still. On all the counters, on all the tables, there stood pans and pots and bowls. The place was a mess.

And at one counter, his back turned to her, stood a man in overalls.

He whirled around quickly.

"Why, Mr. Brown, what are you doing here?" she asked, trying to keep her voice from trembling.

His eyes glittered. "Ask you the same thing," he muttered. "What kind of time is this for a kid to be getting to school?"

Donna paid no attention to his question. She motioned toward the pots and pans.

Mr. Brown quickly began piling them together. "Somebody must have got in and done this," he said. "Don't know why I have to go around cleaning up other people's dirt."

He emptied the contents of several small pans into the sink, and quickly washed and dried everything. Donna had never seen him move so rapidly.

"What did you pour down the sink?" she asked. This was all very strange.

"Huh?" Mr. Brown turned around. "Now, now, girlie," he said. "That was only water, that's all—only water. I put it in the pans to keep the air moist. Gets awful dry in here, it does."

"Oh," said Donna. It seemed like a reasonable answer.

Much later, after a hectic morning of squeezing oranges, scrambling eggs in a double boiler, and making cocoa ("With salt in it," thought Donna, "just as I heard,"), she suddenly stopped and looked around.

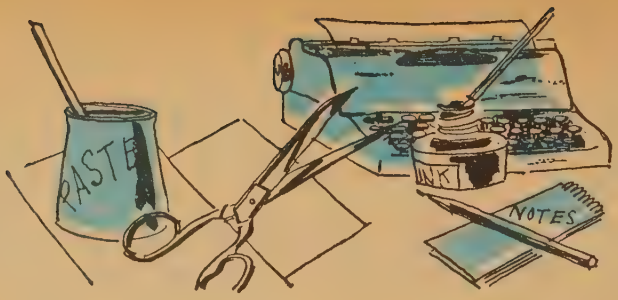
"Hey!" whispered Karen. "Don't stop now. Old Merwood is looking straight at us. Come on, she said that all the silver has to be exactly the same distance from the edge of the table." Karen looked at Donna in alarm. "What's gotten into you? Let's get going. It'll be bad enough to eat those miserable-looking eggs while they're hot. My delicate stomach will simply not take them if they're cold."

"I just thought of something," Donna said, beginning to work again. In fact, she had thought of two things. The first was that Mr. Brown had said he had not put the pans there. Then he had said that it was water in them. How did he know?

The second thing was even more terrifying. Something had been bothering her all morning, and now she knew what it was. It had *not* been water in those pans. Even though she had been standing far away from the sink, a faint odor had reached her. She had smelled that odor only once before, when her uncle had been developing pictures.

Someone in the apartment must have been developing pictures, using those same chemicals. She knew that her uncle was asleep at home. Mr. Brown was the only person in the apartment. Now why would Mr. Brown want to develop pictures at half-past seven in the morning? What was he hiding?

"And I thought everything was so clear," she thought, as she stared at the plate of eggs before her. "It just keeps getting more and more mixed up."



CHAPTER 21 *The Convention*

"Thank goodness I can talk to you about these things," Donna said to Ricky as they walked home from school that afternoon. She remembered the days when Ricky had been so interested in her own affairs that Donna had felt like a stranger with her.

But the coming trip to New York had again given them something to talk about. And the mystery about Donna's uncle, and now the janitor, gave them even more cause for conversation.

"I don't know what to think either," sighed Ricky. "Especially now that it's definite that Mr. Norcross is really your uncle. We had just figured out that he was the spy. I didn't even know that Mr. Brown the janitor was a suspect. But after the things you've told me about his queer actions, and the business about the apartment this morning,

it seems as though he's the one who must be taking Tommy's drawings. Unless—"

"Unless what?" Donna prompted.

"Maybe—maybe there are *two* spies!"

"Oh, my goodness!" Donna turned toward Ricky, her eyes wide. "I never thought of that. Ricky, do you think my uncle and Mr. Brown could be working together?"

"They both came to Summerfield about the same time, didn't they?"

Donna nodded. "That's right. Goodness, what'll we do now?"

Ricky put her hand on Donna's arm. "We mustn't say a word to anyone. They might be warned. We'll just have to watch and wait. The trip to New York will give us a wonderful chance to watch your uncle. He doesn't know we suspect anything, does he?"

"Not a bit. The only people I've talked to about it at all are you and Tommy."

"You're sure your uncle is going with us, aren't you?" Ricky asked in dismay.

"Oh, yes," Donna reassured her. "Mr. Greer was delighted when my father called and talked to him about Uncle Roger. And Miss Fischer was a little surprised, but

she was very happy that the trip wouldn't have to be canceled. She said it was very thoughtful of Uncle Roger to give up his own time so we could go."

"If she only knew as much as we do about him," Ricky said darkly. "I can't wait to see how he acts in New York."

At last the days began to fly by. Four, three, two, one day before the big occasion. Donna made lists and checked things off, then made more lists.

"I'm sure I'll forget something important, like my new shoes or the belt to my dress," she said to Ricky the afternoon before the trip.

"Me, too," said Ricky. "I have piles of stuff all over my room, and I know I'll leave half the things home."

"Karen said she's had everything in her suitcase for almost a week now," said Donna, as she pulled a small brown bag from the bottom of the closet in the sewing room. "And I'm just beginning to pack."

"I'd better go home and do the same thing," said Ricky. "I'm positive I won't be able to find anything at six o'clock in the morning."

Since the staff was due in New York at nine o'clock the next morning, they had all decided to make a seven o'clock train. Everyone had shuddered at the thought of such an

early rising, but they agreed that it probably would be worth it.

At the station the next morning, however, they were not so sure they had been right.

"I couldn't eat one bite of breakfast at this hour," said Ricky, huddled in her new winter coat.

"I couldn't either," agreed Donna. "But that's because I have such big butterflies in my stomach." She stood beside her suitcase and held tight to Ricky's hand.

"Here come the boys," said Karen, as she waved to the group approaching them. "Don't they look slicked up!"

"And here's Miss Fischer, too," said Donna. "I'll go and get Uncle Roger. He said he wanted to buy a newspaper."

"Hi," called the boys, sleepily.

"Isn't this an awful hour to make a decent human being leave his nice warm bed?" asked Jack.

"Now, now," laughed Donna. "Don't pretend you're not just as excited as we are about the trip."

"Everyone's here," called Miss Fischer. "Let's go upstairs to the platform and wait for the train. It should arrive in a few minutes."

They trouped upstairs and onto the windswept platform. The girls shivered in their heavy coats, and even the boys

pushed their hands deep into their pockets and pulled up the collars of their coats.

"Wow, it's good to get out of that cold," said Jack as they piled into the train a few minutes later. Laughing and chattering, they plopped into their seats.

"Make yourselves comfortable, gals," called several of the boys, pushing back the reclining chairs so they could stretch out.

But somehow no one found much time to rest. There was too much to talk about—the scenery, school, the trip ahead of them.

"Did you know that Donna and Ricky know a real French count in New York?" called Karen across the aisle to Mary Jefferson.

Everyone turned around and looked at them. Donna nodded. "That's right. I'm supposed to call him as soon as we get to New York."

There were gasps of delight from the crowd. One of the girls leaned over the seat and whispered in Donna's ear: "Your uncle's terrifically handsome, Donna. I'll bet Miss Fischer thinks so, too. Look how she blushes every time he talks to her."

"Maybe we'd better warn her," said Ricky in a low voice. "And, Donna, remember that the important thing is to watch when your uncle talks to Tommy."

The trip was over so quickly, however, that the girls had little time to notice anything suspicious.

Out of the train, up the escalators, and into the large station went the group.

"Have you ever seen so many people!" Donna exclaimed in wonderment.

"And they're all rushing," added Ricky. "It's a miracle that they don't knock each other down."

"This way," called Miss Fischer, as she herded the group across the huge floor toward the taxi stand. Several cabs were filled with laughing, giggling girls and boys, and Mr. Norcross gave directions to the drivers.

A few minutes later they stopped in front of a large building, with a flower shop on one side and a drug store on the other.

" 'Hotel Claremont,' " Donna read, pointing to the sign over the doorway. A uniformed doorman helped them out of the cab.

"This is where all the junior high groups are staying," explained Miss Fischer. "We'll have our meetings here,

too. I do hope our reservations are in order."

Mr. Norcross took the teacher's elbow, and led her into the hotel. "Now let me attend to all this," he said. "You sit down here and make yourself comfortable."

He was back from the desk in a few minutes with a number of keys.

"All the girls will stay on the twelfth floor," he said, "and the boys will be just above them, on the fourteenth floor."

"But—" began Donna. Then she remembered. It was considered bad luck to have a thirteenth floor, so most hotels merely left out that number.

"Ricky, you and I room together," she squealed, as her uncle passed out the keys. "Oh, good, it'll be just like old times."

"Meet down here in the lobby in ten minutes," called Miss Fischer, as they started toward the elevator.

"Oh, isn't this darling!" Ricky squealed as Donna unlocked the door to their room. "I didn't think the furniture would be so pretty. Everything's green and brown. Look, Donna," she continued, opening and closing drawers, "here's writing paper and pens and everything. And here are extra blankets in the bottom drawer."

She dashed madly back and forth, turning lights on and

off, examining the bathroom, taking hangers out of the closets.

"There's even a telephone on the night table," said Donna. "Which reminds me, I wonder if it's too early to call the count."

She opened the large telephone book. There it was, under D. She gave the hotel operator the number and sprawled across the bed while she waited for an answer.

The voice on the other end of the phone brought back the events of the past summer very clearly. The count sounded just the same.

"But you must not be so formal with me, my Donna," he said, after expressing his delight that she had arrived safely in New York. "I was just Paul to you before, and I should like to remain so. Yes?"

"All right, Paul," Donna replied shyly. In response to his questions, she told him about the convention, and the other boys and girls with whom she had come.

"I should like to meet all your friends, *ma petite*. But you will be so busy today. Perhaps tomorrow night for dinner. I shall meet you at your hotel, if that will be convenient."

"The whole gang?" Donna gasped. "Wouldn't that be too many people, Paul?"

He chuckled. "That is not for you to worry. Tomorrow at six, then."

"Did you hear, Ricky?" Donna squealed as she put down the phone. "I'll have to ask Miss Fischer right away." She grabbed Ricky with one hand, the key to the room with the other hand, and ran toward the elevator.

"What took you so long?" asked Karen when they reached the lobby. "We're due at a meeting upstairs in the ballroom."

Donna quickly told Miss Fischer about the count's invitation, and was delighted that the teacher gave her permission immediately.

All the junior high groups were already seated in the large, high-ceilinged room on the top floor of the hotel. The Summerfield students tiptoed to chairs in the last row.

They listened to a number of speeches by teachers and students on what the various papers had done during the year. Donna noticed that many people around her were taking notes.

"You can get some pretty good ideas," she thought. "I'm sure if Joyce were here, she'd be writing everything down, too. I guess I ought to do it for her."

The morning passed quickly, although by the end of the

meeting she noticed several people around her beginning to fidget. As they left the room, she said to Ricky, "Gee, that was interesting, wasn't it? Look at all the notes I took."

"Not for me," said Ricky, wrinkling her nose. "I was never so bored in my life. How many of these things do we have to sit through?"

Donna looked at her printed schedule. "Let's see. We have lunch now, and then we go up to the university. Oh, Ricky, I hope you don't mind it too much."

"Oh, I'll find enough to interest me," Ricky consoled her. "I think it's fun just looking at the people."

"Instead of taking the subway to get up to the university," Mr. Norcross suggested at lunch in the hotel dining room, "how about riding up there on the Fifth Avenue bus? It'll take longer, but I think you'll all find it much more interesting."

His suggestion was strongly approved. Even Ricky was entranced by the ride. Everyone kept pointing things out to everyone else.

"Look at that store with the roses on the awnings. Isn't that gorgeous?"

"Look at that funny man with the two big dogs."

"Did you ever see so many women in mink coats?"

"And look at all the fancy cars!"

"How do you ever cross the street in all this traffic?"

"Here's Rockefeller Center!"

"And here's Central Park. Aren't those old-fashioned carriages cute? And the drivers in their tall silk hats?"

"Here's the river. We turn here. I guess this is Riverside Drive. Just see all those big apartment houses."

"That funny round building must be Grant's Tomb."

"And here we are. Everybody out!" called Mr. Norcross.

"Is this the university?" Donna asked as they came to a group of large buildings.

"Just part of it, Donna," answered Miss Fischer. "This is where we're to meet the other groups. We're going to see how college students run a newspaper."

"This is more like it," whispered Tommy, as the guide led them into a large room. In the center stood a huge round desk.

"That's the editor's desk," explained the guide. "He gives out all the assignments. Those people that you see typing are the rewrite men. The reporters call them with the news. The boys running back and forth carrying papers are copy boys."

Donna had never seen so many things going on at one

time in one room. She hardly knew where to look first. Slowly the guide led them around the room, telling them what each person was doing. At the end of the tour he gave each of them a copy of the college paper.

"Now we are to hear a talk by the director of the convention," Miss Fischer announced. The guide led them to a small auditorium where they were joined by the other junior high school groups.

A distinguished-looking, gray-haired man told them how the conventions had started, and spoke of the reasons for constantly improving the newspapers.

"He makes you feel that it's really important," said Donna, as they left the auditorium. "I didn't realize how much a good newspaper could do for the people."

The trip back to the hotel by subway was much shorter than the ride there, but everyone enjoyed putting tokens in the turnstiles, and hanging on to the straps as the cars swayed.

"Our groups are having dinner in the hotel dining room," Miss Fischer said as they entered the lobby. "I think we'll just have time to dress before we have to meet them."

"Gosh," said Ricky, as she flopped into an armchair in their bedroom. "This is a real merry-go-round. I've hardly

had a minute to catch my breath."

"Aren't you having a good time?" Donna asked anxiously. Goodness, maybe it would have been better if she hadn't asked Ricky to come on the trip.

"Of course I am. It's simply wonderful." Ricky threw open the closet door. "What should I wear tonight, Donna? I'd love to get really dressed up."

"I think there's a dance orchestra during dinner, Rick. Do you think I could wear the white dress my uncle gave me for my birthday?"

Just then there was a knock on the door. A bellboy with two green oblong boxes stood in the hall. "For Miss Donna Parker and Miss Ricky West," he said, handing them the boxes.

"Oh, flowers!" breathed Donna, taking off the lid. "A corsage of little pink roses from Uncle Roger. Wasn't that sweet? They just match the roses on my white skirt. Now I'll have to wear that dress."

"And my corsage is almost like yours, Donna," said Ricky, holding her flowers up to her shoulder and admiring the effect.

When the girls reached the dining room, they found that Mr. Norcross had sent roses to each girl, and a carnation to

each boy. Miss Fischer was wearing tiny green orchids.

"It makes everyone look so dressed up," said Donna, thanking her uncle.

"In all these lovely gowns, you young ladies put my flowers to shame," he answered, smiling.

Dinner was delicious, and the dancing was delightful. At the end of the evening, everyone agreed that they had never had a better time.

The next day was as hectic as the first. There was a meeting in the morning and a sight-seeing trip in the afternoon.

"Gosh, the Empire State Building, Chinatown, and the Statue of Liberty, all in one afternoon," said Donna, as they entered the hotel late that afternoon. "I'm glad the convention is over tomorrow. I don't think I'd be able to stand much more."

"Well," said Ricky, ringing for the elevator, "tonight's the night I've been waiting for."

"Yeeks!" exclaimed Donna. "Dinner with the count—I almost forgot. We don't have much time, either."

While they were dressing, Donna turned suddenly to Ricky. "What about my uncle, Rick? Have you been able to learn anything? As far as I could see, he's hardly said a word to Tommy."

Ricky bent down to buckle her shoe strap. "I'm beginning to change my mind, Donna. A man nice enough to send flowers to all of us couldn't be a spy."

"Oh, dear," thought Donna. "Ricky changes her mind so very easily. I can see she won't be much good to me."

The count was waiting for them in the lobby. Donna hardly recognized him. Only once before, on the last day of the camp season, had she seen him with his mustache trimmed, his clothes well-tailored. Now he looked like a figure from an elegant magazine.

He greeted her warmly, and was most charming as she introduced him to her classmates, Miss Fischer, and Uncle Roger. After chatting for a few minutes, he led them to the taxicabs.

"You will come with me, yes?" he asked Donna and Ricky. "The others will meet us at the restaurant."

When their cab pulled up to a dark store front, surrounded by shabby shops, on a street where heavy, semi-trailer trucks thundered by, Donna and Ricky could hardly believe their eyes. Was this where the count was taking them? They could hardly conceal their disappointment.

But inside, as they became accustomed to the dim light, their feelings changed.

Candles burned at each table. On the wall hung huge copper pans which caught the candlelight. Waitresses dressed in French peasant costumes, with starched white flyaway caps, glided about between the tables.

The rest of the group soon joined them, and the head-waiter led them to their table. Even Uncle Roger seemed impressed by the place the count had chosen. "One of the finest restaurants in the country," Donna heard him murmur to Miss Fischer.

"What's that?" Donna asked, pointing to a waitress who was preparing what looked like a dish of fire.

"A dessert *flambe,*" said the count, leaning toward her. "Perhaps Cherries Jubilee or Crepes Suzette, or even perhaps a rum-soaked Baked Alaska. The liqueur is set on fire —then *poof,* it is out. You would like that, yes?"

Donna's eyes sparkled. Who had ever heard of a dessert with fire! Wait till she told her mother and father.

Suddenly she gasped. She grabbed Ricky's arm and pinched her. Ricky let out a little shriek.

"Ssh!" Donna cautioned. "Don't say a word. Just look at the man over in the corner, sitting alone. Does he look familiar?"

Ricky's jaw gaped. "Oh, Donna, it couldn't be! He's so

dressed up. Are you absolutely certain?"

"Ask Tommy what he thinks," whispered Donna, her heart pounding furiously.

Ricky turned to the boy who was seated on the other side of her. In a minute she turned back.

"Tommy thinks so, too, Donna. It's Mr. Brown!"

"What in the world is he doing here, I wonder. A janitor in a fancy restaurant like this!" Donna asked. "Don't you think I'd better tell Miss Fischer?"

"Wait a second, Donna. He's still reading the menu. As soon as he looks up, we'll know positively."

"What's he doing now?" Donna whispered.

"He closed the menu, and he's passing it to the man at the next table."

"Have you ever seen that man before?" asked Ricky in surprise.

"No. And Mr. Brown isn't talking to him. Maybe he doesn't know him, either."

The two girls watched while the other man reached for the menu which Mr. Brown was holding. Suddenly Donna uttered a startled cry. A piece of paper had fallen out of the menu and was fluttering toward the floor. Both men reached to pick it up.

CHAPTER 22 *The Count Chases a Spy*

Everyone at the table turned to look at Donna.

"Is something the matter?" asked Mr. Norcross, noting his niece's face, from which all color had been drained.

Ricky pinched her. "Don't say a word. Maybe he's in on this, too. Maybe he arranged to meet Mr. Brown here."

Donna shook her head and tried to smile reassuringly, to show that she was all right. Her throat was too dry for her to speak. But she was sure Ricky could not be right. Her uncle could not have known to which restaurant they were going. She was positive now that he knew nothing about Mr. Brown.

The count, to her left at the head of the table, bent toward her.

"What is the matter, *ma petite?*" he asked in a tone of concern. "Surely you can tell Paul."

"N-Nothing," she said, taking a sip of water from her glass, and trying to appear calm. The others were chattering together again. "I just thought I saw someone I knew."

"Here? You know someone who is here? What a charming surprise. Who is this person?"

"I'm—I'm not at all sure I'm right," she stammered. "It's the man over there in the corner."

The count glanced over his shoulder in the direction in which Donna had nodded. Then he turned toward her, very much excited, and grasped her hand.

"You think you know this man?" he asked, his voice low. "But how is it possible?"

"Ricky and Tommy and I all believe that he's a Mr. Brown, the janitor at our school in Summerfield. But of course he looks so different, now that he's all dressed up."

"So!" exclaimed the count. "Now he is a janitor."

"What do you mean?" asked Donna in astonishment. "Do you know him, too?"

"Most certainly, my little one. I am very much afraid I do. But tell me, how long has he been in your school? It is important. Quickly!"

The waitress had come to the opposite end of the table and was busily writing down the orders.

The count noticed Donna's nervous glance, and patted her hand.

"Never fear. No one will hear you. What is it that you have to tell me?"

Rapidly Donna told him of the first time she and Tommy had seen Mr. Brown, and of his strange behavior at the school. The count listened intently while she explained about Tommy's drawings and the morning she had seen Mr. Brown in the domestic science department.

"So!" he exclaimed when she had finished. "Now I will tell you a little about our friend the janitor. When I was in Europe, he was well-known to many of us. A dangerous man, this Mr. Brown, although that was not his name then."

Ricky, too, leaned forward to hear the count's story. "Why do you say he is dangerous, Count?" she whispered.

The elderly man passed his hand over his forehead, as though trying to erase unpleasant memories.

"I cannot tell you the whole story. He is indeed a spy, but not for one country. He will work for any country that will pay him; when I knew him in France he was working for someone else. Governments all over the world have been looking for him. Somehow he manages not to get

caught. But if the paper which you saw him drop contains what I think it does, this may be the end of his career."

"Why—what do you mean?" Donna asked. "What can be done to catch him?"

"A telephone call perhaps will help," said the count, pushing his chair back from the table. "I shall contact your agents—how are they named?"

"You mean the F.B.I.?" asked Tommy, trying to control the excitement in his voice. "You'll really call the Federal Bureau of Investigation?"

The count nodded. "You may perhaps have not realized the seriousness of what this Mr. Brown has been doing. I shall speak just a word to your uncle, my Donna, so he will know that I will return in a moment."

"Don't worry, Paul," she assured him. "We'll keep an eye on Mr. Brown."

The three waited in silence as the Count de la Tour Pointue talked softly for a moment to Mr. Norcross and then walked to an adjoining room.

"Gosh!" Ricky tapped nervously on the table. "I hope Mr. Brown and the other man don't leave before the count comes back. What would we do then?"

"We'd have to follow them," Donna said firmly. But

deep down, she was hoping strongly that this would not be necessary. Of course, if Paul went with them it would be different.

In a minute the count returned. "They will send men here immediately," he whispered. "If they leave before the men arrive, I am to follow, and leave word with your uncle."

"We want to go, too," protested Donna. "After all, we got you into all this, Paul. If anything happened to you, it would be our fault."

The man smiled down at her. "So you worry about Paul? Never fear, my dear. This old one can take care of himself well. You are correct, however. If I go, you must go, too. It would not be right to protect you from this excitement. You are practically a special agent, now."

Then he looked at the three soberly. "But you must promise me one thing. If we have to make the—what is it? —the chase, you are to stay in the cab."

Their faces fell, but they realized that the count was right. Anyhow, maybe the F.B.I. would arrive before the two men left.

Donna leaned forward. "Mr. Brown is looking this way now. I don't think he saw us before. I don't know yet

whether he's recognized us. He just noticed Miss Fischer. Now he's looking toward the other man and motioning. Oh, Paul, they're getting up to go. Maybe they think we haven't seen them."

"Quickly!" Paul commanded. "We must be close, but not too close. The minute they are out the door, we will leave."

Donna saw Mr. Brown stop for a second to leave some money at the desk, and grab his coat from the hat-check girl.

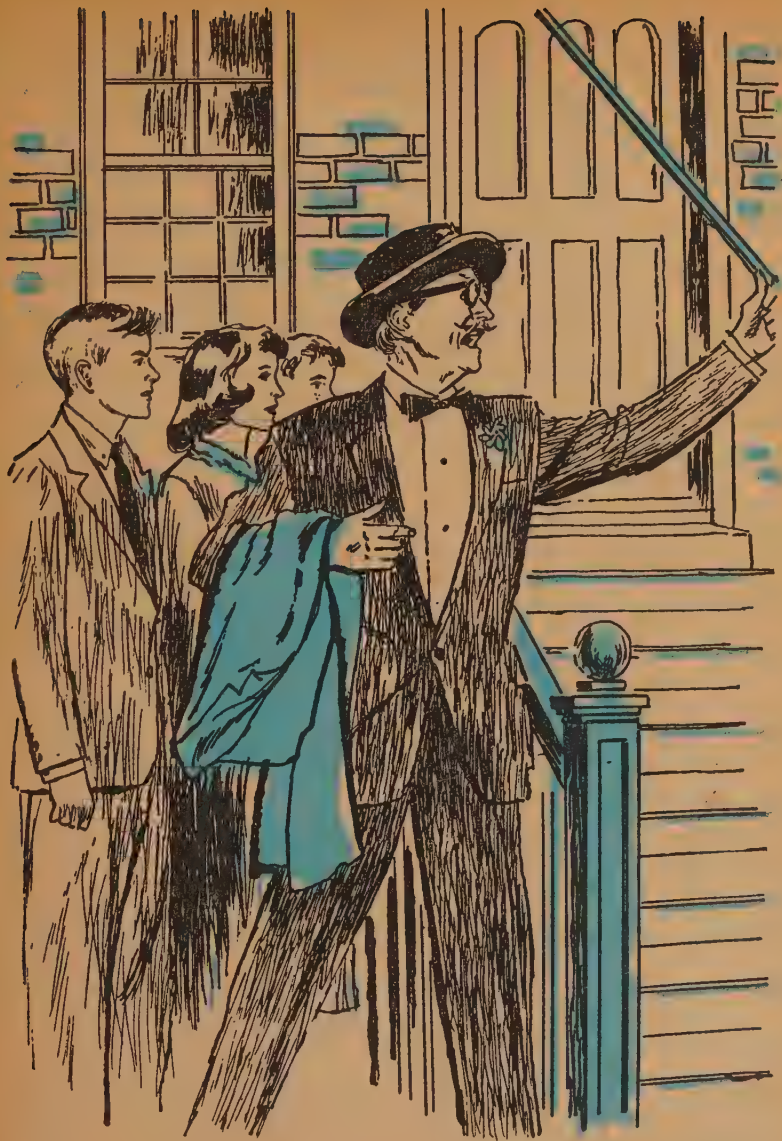
"Now!" signaled the count. The other boys and girls started to call to them as they left, but Donna heard her uncle say, "Let them go. I'll explain everything."

As they reached the sidewalk, they saw a green cab drive away with the two men.

The count whistled shrilly for another taxi. "Follow the green cab ahead. It is most important," he told the driver.

"Again we are playing cat and mouse," the count murmured, leaning forward eagerly, and not taking his eyes from the car ahead.

Their cab raced after the green taxi, careening around trucks and automobiles, stopping anxiously for pedestrians and red lights.



"Say," Tommy wondered, "do you think they know they're being followed?"

"Most likely," answered the count. "I do not want to catch them, only to see where they are going. Without evidence we can do nothing."

"It's turning!" cried Donna, as they glimpsed the green cab whizzing into a cross street. Their cab followed, a little way behind. Then they turned into a broad avenue.

"Now where?" asked Ricky, bewildered, as the cab disappeared from view.

"Between those two large buildings," the count pointed out. "They will probably use a side entrance. We must hurry now, so I do not lose them."

Before their cab had completely stopped, he flung himself out the door, and raced through a side door with the energy of a much younger man.

"Now all we can do is wait," sighed Donna, leaning against the back of the seat. "Oh, I do hope nothing happens to him."

"And I hope they don't escape," said Tommy. "Wow! This will really be something to tell the fellows."

Donna said nothing more, but chewed on her knuckles. If any harm befell the count, it would be her fault. She

wished she knew what was going on.

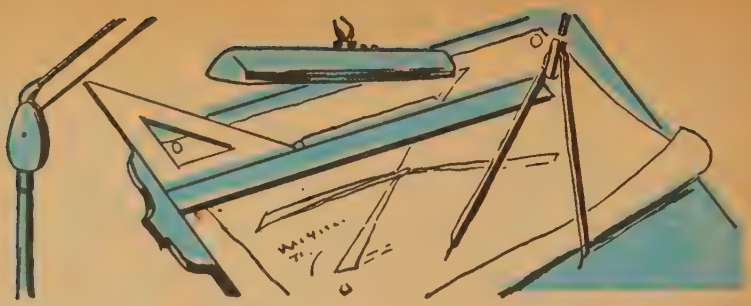
"Hey, look!" said Tommy, craning his neck to see another cab draw up behind them. "I wonder what's happening now?"

Two men jumped out of the newly arrived cab and ran into the apartment house.

"My gosh!" exclaimed Ricky. "Who do you suppose they are?"

"Well, they could be F.B.I. agents—" Tommy began. Then he stopped and looked uncomfortable.

"I know what you're thinking." Donna finished the sentence for him. "Or they could be more friends of Mr. Brown. Oh, what'll we do now?"



CHAPTER 23

Explanations

"We can't do anything but wait," Tommy advised. "If nothing happens in the next few minutes, I'll go across the street and call the F.B.I. again to tell them where we are."

Donna and Ricky nodded glumly. But to their relief they did not have long to wait. In a little while the count reappeared, with a merry twinkle in his eye. He wiped his hands, to show that the matter was finished.

"Oh, thank goodness," sighed Donna, clutching his hand. "You're all right."

"We were awfully worried, sir," said Tommy.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Ricky asked excitedly.

The count settled back and gave the driver instructions to return to the restaurant.

"Congratulations to the three of you," he said warmly. "Because of three young people, a dangerous man has been

caught and turned over to the proper authorities."

"Then those other men were F.B.I. agents?" asked Donna. "We weren't sure."

"Oh, ho!" Paul laughed. "You miss nothing, do you? Yes, they reached the restaurant immediately after we left, and had the good fortune to be able to follow us here."

"Imagine!" said Donna. "While we were following Mr. Brown, they were following us. And I didn't even notice them. I guess I wouldn't make a very good counter-spy, would I?"

"This is not exactly a business for children, little one," Paul consoled her. "I was almost sure that they were behind. Otherwise, I would not have taken the chance to go up to the eighth floor after your Mr. Brown by myself."

"How did you know they were on the eighth floor?" Ricky asked.

"They were foolish enough to take the elevator," he explained. "I had only to see where the little dial stopped, and knew that was where they got out. Simple, yes?"

"And then the agents came?" Donna asked. "Did you find the evidence you needed, Paul?"

"Oh, my dear," he chuckled. "It was beautiful. Beautiful! All around them were plans, drawings, pictures. The

agents took them all. They learned everything quickly. Now they have all the evidence they need. I am afraid it is the end for Mr. Brown."

There was silence for a few moments. Donna looked out of the cab window. The people on the streets, the shop windows, the signs, the cars and buses racing by—nothing had changed. And yet so much had happened, it was hard to believe it was the same day, or the same city.

She thought of the first time she and Tommy had seen Mr. Brown, a shabby figure standing in the hall outside the newspaper office. She shook her head, as though coming out of a dream.

"Something troubles you, my little friend?" asked the count.

"I can hardly believe it's all true," she said. "I'm not sure I have the whole story straight yet."

"That's just the way I feel," agreed Ricky.

Tommy nodded, too. "Doesn't it feel as though it couldn't possibly have happened to plain, ordinary people like us?"

"Maybe if you begin at the beginning," Donna suggested, "we'll finally understand it."

"Of course," said the count. "As you said. We will begin at the beginning." He drew a deep breath. "As I told you,

this Mr. Brown is not hired by one country. He goes from one place to another, looking for ways to get information that would be valuable to someone else. This time he decided that the enemy would be interested in the new kinds of planes being developed. And so he came to see what he could learn about the Sheridan Helicopter factory."

"But why did he work at the school?" asked Donna. "Why not at the factory?"

"I can answer that," replied Tommy. "I'll bet my father wouldn't hire him. You know he makes a very careful investigation of everyone who works for him."

Donna interrupted, "—and Mr. Brown couldn't pass the investigation, I guess."

The count nodded. "Correct. Then he learned about the job at the school. Since he could then stay nearby, he took this work instead."

"But how did he know that I was working on plans right in the school?" asked Tommy.

"That he did not know—until later," explained the count. "When he read of your award, he decided to watch you. The plans were a—what you call it?—a lucky break."

Then the count frowned. "He did indeed photograph the plans in the apartment, as you believed, Donna. For some

time he had been using this apartment."

"So he was the one who messed up the place when Miss Merwood blamed us," Donna said to Ricky. "And he probably tore the blinds, trying to make the room dark enough to use to develop the pictures."

"But how did he get into the apartment?" asked Ricky. "Miss Merwood always had the key."

"Except when she went home," said Donna thoughtfully. "We forgot that she put it in the office each night, and it would be easy enough for the janitor to get the key there."

"About this business I do not know," said the count, and his frown deepened. "What I do know is that he realized that he must move quickly, and told the enemy agent to meet him here today. Never did he expect to meet you in a restaurant in New York!"

"Wow!" Donna giggled. "He went all this way to avoid us, and then he bumped right into us. I'll bet he was mad."

"Yes, you are right. But I am not so happy, also. We must tell your father immediately, Tommy, that photographs of the plans may be in enemy hands."

It was Tommy's turn to laugh. "Oh, don't let that worry you, sir. As soon as my father saw those plans, he told me what was wrong with them. The ones in school weren't any

good at all. I have all the good drawings at home."

The girls gasped in surprise and delight.

The count leaned back in his seat and chuckled. "So the fox is outfoxed, yes? A good joke, indeed! Oh, he will really be angry when he learns."

"No wonder he didn't work for any one country," said Donna. "He couldn't have been so smart, to spend all that time photographing plans that were useless."

"Not smart at all," agreed the count. "He did it only for the money—a soldier of fortune, one might call him." He took a deep breath. "And here we are back at the restaurant again. I am afraid that my little dinner for your friends has been spoiled."

But no one agreed with him. They were greeted with wild acclaim by the rest of the group. Indeed, everyone felt that it was probably the most exciting meal they would ever have.

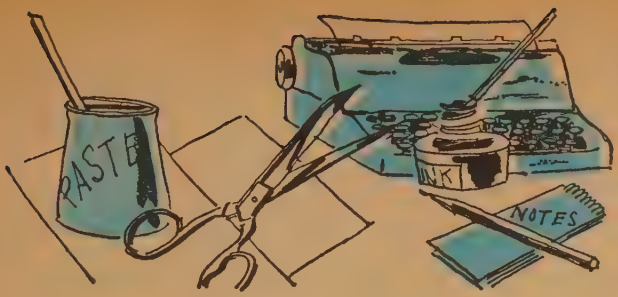
"Oh, Uncle Roger," cried Donna, flinging her arms about his neck, right in front of Miss Fischer and all her friends. "I can't tell you how glad I am that Mr. Brown was a spy."

He gave her a tight hug but looked a little bewildered. Only Ricky and Tommy knew what she meant.

"I wish the convention were over right this minute,"

Donna said. "I can't wait to get home and tell Mother and Daddy all about it. Anyhow, nothing else exciting could possibly happen."

But the next afternoon, looking back on the trip, Donna wondered how she could ever have said such a thing.



CHAPTER 24 *A Prize and a Surprise*

The morning began quietly enough. The sky outside the hotel bedroom was dull and overcast.

"I'm glad we could sleep a little later this morning," yawned Donna, stretching her arms.

Ricky pulled the blanket back over her head. "Nothing to do until the luncheon today," she muttered. "Don't wake me until noon."

"Why, Ricky West!" cried Donna. "We've got to get dressed and be all packed before noon. You know that we leave right after the luncheon."

Ricky poked her nose out of the covers. "Aren't we even coming back to the hotel?"

"Just to get our bags. Miss Fischer said we were to check them downstairs on our way out."

Ricky thrust her legs over the side of the bed. "As far

as I'm concerned the trip is over." Donna watched a dreamy expression come over her friend's face. "Wasn't last night wonderful? It was the most exciting thing I've ever lived through—better than any play or movie."

Donna pulled the brown suitcase from the floor of the closet and set it on the luggage rack. "I know. I didn't think I'd be able to eat a thing. But when that luscious food was put before me, it's amazing how hungry I got."

She picked up her bedroom slippers from under her bed and tucked them neatly into one corner of the bag. Ricky continued to dangle her legs.

"And wasn't the count sweet?" Donna continued. "He gave us all the credit for catching Mr. Brown, though actually he did everything. I can't wait to get home and tell Mother and Daddy about it."

"Wasn't it lucky you never said anything to your mother, about what we thought about your Uncle Roger?" mused Ricky. "We'd feel awfully silly now."

"That's just what I was thinking, Ricky."

When the girls had finished dressing and packing, they looked around at the room.

"I don't think we've left anything," Donna said, picking up her bag. "But I wish we didn't have to go to this old

luncheon. I feel so good now, and I know I'll feel badly when we don't win any prizes."

Ricky tried hard to cheer her up. "From what I heard at the meetings, everyone has had a lot more experience than you, Donna. You were only editor for part of the time anyhow, so it certainly wouldn't be your fault."

Nevertheless, when Donna entered the immense dining room of the nearby hotel, and saw the expectant faces of the people from the other junior high schools, she could not help but feel a little blue.

"Oh, come on, Donna, smile a little." Ricky nudged her, as they were seated at a large round table with the rest of the group from Summerfield Junior High School. "Did you ever see such a huge place in your life?"

Donna looked around. It was almost impossible to see the walls of the room, they were so far away. And every inch of floor space was covered with tables like the one at which she was sitting. The seats were filling rapidly, and in a few minutes there was not an empty chair to be seen.

The babble of voices was deafening. She heard Texas drawls, New England twangs, and speech from every section of the United States.

"The judges are coming in now," Miss Fischer told them,

pointing to a long narrow table banked with flowers, which stood along one side of the room. Donna had to lean far over, in order to hear what the teacher said.

Donna was surprised to see how quickly luncheon could be served to so many hundreds of people. But although the food looked delicious, she found that she was able to eat very little. It was not the meal in which she was interested.

Immediately after dessert was served, a man sitting at the middle of the speakers' table stood up. "Good afternoon," he said through a microphone, in a deep bass voice.

Suddenly there was complete silence in the huge room. Even the waiters stood still, trays in hand.

"I know that you are most interested in hearing the results of the competitions," said the man. "And so I have suggested that, before there are any speeches, the names of the prize-winners should be read."

There was deafening applause from the audience. "I guess I'm not the only one who wants to know who won," thought Donna.

Everyone strained forward, in order not to miss any names.

"Senior high schools first," said the announcer, and he picked up a large sheet of paper.

Donna leaned back. This was not the part that concerned her. As each name was read, someone from the newspaper came to accept the award. At length the man put down the paper from which he was reading and picked up another one.

"Junior high schools," he read.

Donna clutched Ricky's hand tightly. She could feel how wet her palm was.

One name after another was read off. Donna tried to pretend that she was not interested. But when the man put down the paper, and the name of the *Sum-It-Up* had not been mentioned, she felt a lump arise unbidden in her throat.

At that moment, she heard Miss Fischer cry, "Why, look who's here!"

She turned around in time to hear a gasp from the others at the table.

There, standing beside Miss Fischer, and smiling almost from ear to ear, stood a girl on crutches.

"It's Joyce! Joyce Davenport!" Everyone was talking at once.

"How did you get here?"

"When did you come?"

"Your cast is off! How do you feel?"

"I feel just fine," said Joyce, still grinning. "And I think I'm as surprised as you are that I'm here."

A waiter quickly found a chair for her, and she sat between Miss Fischer and Mr. Norcross.

"The doctor took my cast off a few days ago," she explained, "which was sooner than he expected. But he was sure I wouldn't be able to walk on crutches well enough to get here."

She patted her crutches proudly. "But I practiced and practiced, and finally he said I could come if I didn't stay too long. Daddy drove me all the way from Summerfield."

"I'm so sorry you weren't here in time for the luncheon," said Donna. "But you didn't miss much—you know we didn't win any prizes."

Just then the voice of the announcer came over the loudspeaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have just been handed another sheet of paper. It seems that this year, a special prize is being awarded in the Junior High School Division. It is for special service to the community."

"How did you know where to find us?" Donna whispered to Joyce across the table.

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"Ssh!" cautioned Miss Fischer. "Let's listen."

"And this special award, I am pleased to say, has been won by a newspaper which has done a job which can set an example to all other school newspapers," continued the announcer. "I'm referring to the *Summerfield Sum-It-Up!"*

There was a gasp from everyone at the table.

"Will the editor of that paper please come up to the speakers' table?" he went on.

Everyone pushed Joyce forward. Wearing a dazed expression, she picked up her crutches and hobbled through the crowd.

"I'm so glad!" breathed Donna. "Wasn't it wonderful that she came just in time to get the award?"

They watched while the announcer shook Joyce's hand and gave her a small parchment tied in red ribbon. Then, to their surprise, Joyce leaned forward and spoke into the microphone in a sure, clear voice.

"Everyone on our paper wishes to thank you for this award. But I am not the person to accept it. For most of the term, I have been away. My place has been taken by someone who has done a wonderful job—Donna Parker. With your permission, I should like to ask her to come up to the platform and accept this award with me."

Donna blushed. She felt everyone turning to stare at her.

"Oh, no," she whispered. She felt herself turn red to the roots of her hair.

"It was Joyce's idea to work on the city election," she protested. "She really should get the credit for it."

But the other members of the staff were all looking at Joyce now. And to Donna's surprise, she saw something new in their expressions. For the first time, they were looking at the girl with admiration.

"Why, they're realizing that she's nice after all," Donna thought. "She's done a very generous thing, and they respect her for it. In fact, they look as though they actually *like* her!"

She felt someone push back her chair. Hardly realizing what she was doing, she found herself walking toward the speakers' table.

Joyce put into her hand the important piece of paper. The applause was thunderous.

Together, they walked back to their table.

"I was right," thought Donna, seeing how everyone greeted them. "The fact that the other boys and girls like her means much more to Joyce than any award. She looks positively beautiful at this moment."

"I'm proud of both my editors," said Miss Fischer warmly, putting an arm around each girl. "In fact, I'm proud of the entire staff. Every single one of you worked hard, and you certainly deserved the award."

The rest of the speeches were short. When everyone arose to leave, Miss Fischer said, "We'll go back to the hotel and pick up our luggage. Then we'll all go to the station together. We are to take the three o'clock train back to Summerfield."

Donna said good-by to Joyce and looked around for Ricky. Her uncle drew her aside.

"Donna," he said, "I'd like to sit with you on the train ride home. Do you mind? I have something to tell you."

CHAPTER 25 *Journey's End*

"It seems that we just got into the station," said Donna, as she saw the hurrying people around her. "And here we are back again."

"But so much has happened in between," Ricky reminded her. "Donna, what do you think your uncle wants to talk to you about?"

Donna shook her head. "I wish I knew. And I wonder why he picked this time to tell me."

She did not have to wait long to learn the reason. As soon as everyone was seated on the train, her uncle joined her.

"If you're the smart young lady that I think you are," he said to her, smilingly, "you probably have done a little bit of wondering about your new uncle."

Donna looked uncomfortable. "Well, I must admit that

you're pretty mysterious, Uncle Roger. But after all, that's your business, and none of mine."

"Those trips to New York worried you, didn't they? But they really were business, Donna. You see, I actually do work for the movies. But at the time, I couldn't say very much about my job. In fact, I don't know whether you'll understand it very well now, when I'm able to tell you."

"I'll try," said Donna, wondering what could be so hard to understand about the movies.

"I'm an engineer, Donna—a sound engineer. I try to develop new and better kinds of sound tracks, so what you hear at the movies will be more and more lifelike."

He paused for a moment, as though searching for the right words.

"I have spent the last year working on a new kind of sound track, but there were a few things that had me stumped. I needed the help of a firm of engineers here in New York."

"But why did it have to be secret, Uncle Roger?"

"We wanted to be the first in the business to have this," he answered. "If anyone else had any idea of what we were doing, they'd naturally try to copy it."

"Oh!" Donna nodded. "And you had to keep coming to

New York to see if the men here could help you?"

"That's right. Now it's completed. Everything has turned out even better than I expected. Now I can return to the Coast."

"Oh, will you be leaving so soon, Uncle Roger?" Donna asked. For the first time, she realized how much she would miss him when he was gone. "Will I see you again soon?"

"I haven't finished what I wanted to say, Donna," he said. He turned around and beckoned to Miss Fischer, who had obviously been waiting for him to signal. She came over to him, dimpling demurely.

Not a word had to be said. Donna gasped. "Oh, Uncle Roger—Miss Fischer—do you mean—?"

They both nodded.

"Why did you think I wanted to come to New York?" asked Mr. Norcross. "When I met your Miss Fischer for the first time, I thought she was too good to be true. But now I'm sure she *is* true, and I'm not going to let her go."

"Donna," said Miss Fischer, "I'm afraid I won't be teaching much longer. We'll be married as soon as we get back to Summerfield. Your uncle wants me to fly to California with him immediately. I called Mr. Greer, and he has agreed to let me go."

"Oh, Miss Fischer. We'll miss you at school. How will the paper get along without you?"

"You and Joyce together can do an excellent job until Mr. Greer gets someone to replace me," said the young woman. "Your uncle has convinced me that he needs me more than the school does."

"Donna, don't look so sad," said Mr. Norcross. "You'll see your new aunt again soon, I hope. We want you to be our very first guest in California. In fact, as soon as we arrive there, we're going to send you an airline ticket. And we want you to use it as soon as you have a vacation." He grinned at Donna's startled expression, then moved on down the aisle after Miss Fischer.

Donna was left alone, in her seat by the window. It had been a wonderful trip, and Uncle Roger's news provided a perfect climax. An uncle who worked for a movie studio—Miss Fischer for her very own aunt—! Breathless with excitement, Donna jumped up and hurried down the aisle to find Ricky.

Whitman CLASSICS

Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch

Little Women

Black Beauty

Huckleberry Finn

Heidi

The Call of the Wild

Tom Sawyer

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The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

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